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Abstract

“The Lonely Nineties” provides a close reading of six popular series on primetime American television in the 1990s, setting their depictions of community within the context of late 20th century problems and developments in civic disengagement. This dissertation examines *Seinfeld*, *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, *Law & Order*, *The X-Files*, *Touched by an Angel*, and *The Simpsons* within their respective genres, revealing what makes nineties television distinctive, and connecting those distinctions to related developments in American social and cultural history. In the final decade when the medium still offered regularly a simultaneous experience of mass culture, television imagined communities in various states of fragmentation just as America, itself, was grappling with a fragmented age.

**The Lonely Nineties:
Visions of Community on Television between the End of the Cold War and 9/11**

by

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Dissertation

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Introduction

Why Were the Nineties Lonely?

Tom Brokaw stood on a raised platform with a massive crowd behind him, a hint of joy—or was it smugness?—peeking through the corners of his mouth. The Brandenburg Gate loomed in the night shadows behind his head. A horizontal band of graffiti-covered concrete bisected the backdrop. A few brave Berliners had already climbed onto the top of the wall, ignoring the jets of water aimed halfheartedly from unseen authorities on the other side. It was Thursday, November 9, 1989. The Berlin Wall was coming down. And NBC news alone was on the scene to cover it live.¹

A few days earlier NBC's foreign news chief had a hunch. He convinced Brokaw and the show's producers to take the *Nightly News* to Berlin. Thus, Brokaw happened to be at the famous press conference when East Germany's propaganda minister made the surprising announcement that East Germans were immediately free to travel beyond the Iron Curtain. The minister had jumped the gun, and the border guards were not ready for the crowds that surged to the wall. But NBC was. Even West German networks were slower than NBC in getting their live positions up and running before the guards opened the crossings.²

It was a big Thursday night for NBC.³ Then again, for several years, Thursday night had *always* been a big night for the Peacock. After Brokaw signed off at 7:00 PM on the east coast,

¹ Elizabeth Guider, "Yank Webs Provide Fanfare: NBC, Still Smarting from San Francisco Fracas, is First out of the Gate; Brokaw Made Beeline for Berlin and Caught Other Webs Napping," *Variety*, Nov. 15, 1989, 35-36.

² Bill Wheatley, "'Good evening, live from the Berlin Wall:' Persistence, Good Luck Combined to Create Historic Exclusive Broadcast," NBC News, November 5, 2009, accessed on Oct. 6, 2015, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/33590933/ns/world_news-fall_of_the_berlin_wall_20_years_later/t/good-evening-live-berlin-wall/#.VhQXP2u1MzE.

³ It was a big night in terms of journalistic prestige, at least. In fact, NBC's live coverage of the wall did not help its evening news out of third place, where it was consistently finishing in the late eighties. Bob Knight, "Series Fare Helps NBC Win Again; Sweeps Spex Quiet," *Variety*, November 22, 1989, 90.

NBC packed up its live coverage for the night. As Berlin's impromptu freedom party continued through the night, NBC's juggernaut primetime schedule kicked into gear.⁴ On *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-92) at 8:00, Dr. Cliff (Bill Cosby), the patriarch of the middle class, African-American Huxtable family, has a wild dream; Peruvian spores had contaminated the American water supply, impregnating every male. Cliff awakes with a new appreciation for his wife, and the toil of mothers everywhere.⁵

Next up, at 8:30, was a spin-off of *The Cosby Show*. *A Different World* (NBC, 1987-93) followed a group of students attending a historically black college. This episode also explored the theme of parenthood as Ron (Darryl M. Bell) starts dating a young female classmate who has a child.⁶

Cheers (NBC, 1982-93) followed at 9:00 with the darkly comedic news that waitress Carla Tortelli's latest husband was killed by a Zamboni. Tortelli, always unlucky in love, discovers at the funeral that her husband had secretly married another woman.⁷

At 9:30 came *Dear John* (NBC, 1988-92), the least successful sitcom in the block, about divorcé, John Lacey (Judd Hirsch), who attended a support group for other lonely hearts. In this episode, John reads a self-help book that motivates him to try to publish his own poetry.⁸

Finally, at 10:00, the lawyers on *L.A. Law* (NBC, 1986-94) deal with a variety of cases ranging from the serious (a black college professor charged with murdering a white woman who

⁴ The news did not run past 7:00 that night, other than a few news bulletins throughout the evening. One hour of syndicated programming filled NBC affiliates' schedules until 8:00. Also note, all times are east coast throughout this dissertation.

⁵ "The Day the Spores Landed," *The Cosby Show*, season six, episode eight (NBC, November 9, 1989).

⁶ "Delusions of Daddyhood," *A Different World*, season three, episode six (NBC, November 9, 1989).

⁷ "Death Takes a Holiday on Ice," *Cheers*, season eight, episode seven (NBC, November 9, 1989).

⁸ "The Secret of Success," *Dear John*, season two, episode four (NBC, November 9, 1989).

was his student and lover) to the scandalously silly (an S&M obsessed insurance agent falls for the tough lawyer prosecuting him for fraud).⁹

From 1984 to 1991, *The Cosby Show* at 8:00 and *Cheers* at 9:00 served as the foundation of NBC's consistently strong Thursday night schedule. Two dramas, *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-87) and then *L.A. Law*, held the 10:00 slot. That basic lineup consistently beat the other networks in the Nielsen ratings throughout that period.¹⁰

The night the Berlin Wall fell, 24,406,500 households watched *The Cosby Show*; that is a 26.5 Nielsen rating, multiplied by 921,000. (Each Nielsen point is worth 1% of the number of households with television sets in that particular year. In 1989-90, Nielsen counted 92,100,000 American households that owned a television.)¹¹ Nielsen recorded a 42 share for *The Cosby Show*, which means 42% of the television sets turned on in America at 8:00 were tuned to NBC.¹² Those are impressive numbers, but not remotely historic. In fact, they were consistent for *The Cosby Show*; the week before, *The Cosby Show* scored a 25.4 rating and a 39 share,¹³ and it

⁹ "Captain Hurt," *L.A. Law*, season four, episode two (NBC, November 9, 1989).

¹⁰ Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), 1690-2. *The Cosby Show* was the top-rated sitcom on television for every season it was on except its last two, and the top-rated show overall for five straight years, from the 1985-86 season to 1989-90. *Cheers* moved into the top 20 for the first time in 1984, not coincidentally, the year *The Cosby Show* debuted. From 1985 to its penultimate season, *Cheers* never dropped lower than fourth overall, peaking at number one in 1990-91. *A Different World* was neck-and-neck with *Cheers* in the ratings, only tumbling out of the top four overall in 1991-92, as *The Cosby Show*'s ratings declined in its final season. And *L.A. Law* was consistently a top 30 show from its 1986 debut through the 1991-92 season, making it a top five drama for most of that period. Even *Dear John* did well; buoyed by its neighbors on the schedule, it finished 11th and 17th overall until it tumbled down the charts when NBC moved it off of Thursday.

¹¹ "US Television Households by Season," *TV by the Numbers* (August 28, 2009), accessed March 30, 2015 from <https://web.archive.org/web/20150905152148/http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2007/08/28/us-television-households-by-season/273/>.

¹² "TV Ratings Week 8—Nov. 6-Nov. 12," *Variety*, November 22, 1989, 90. It was a good time for NBC to score strong ratings, coming as they did in the middle of the November sweeps, one of the months, along with February and May, to which advertisers annually look when they buy ad space. For more on the November 1989 sweeps see Bob Knight, "Sweeps a Downer for Nets; Ratings Drop, Specials Flop," *Variety*, December 6, 1989, 119, 123.

¹³ "TV Ratings Week 7—Oct. 30-Nov. 5," *Variety*, November 15, 1989, 46.

averaged 23.1 for the whole season.¹⁴ *The Cosby Show* did not need a breaking, world-altering story to boost ratings; tens of millions of Americans watched the series every week throughout its run.

The news coverage of momentous global events and the ratings of that coverage tell a remarkable story about Americans' engagement with and understanding of the world, but this dissertation instead turns to the import of Americans' more mundane habit: their viewing of fictional television shows, and what the most popular shows reveal about their moment in American history. This dissertation is interdisciplinary in its thinking about the historical significance of a television show like *The Cosby Show*, blending media studies with cultural history. My hybrid approach seeks to correct certain tendencies within each field that limit the breadth of their conclusions about television's historical significance. On one hand, the typical historical approach considers television as a mirror; the conclusions of this approach may not be wrong, but they are limited. On the other hand, many approaches within media studies have a tendency to examine a television show on its own narrow terms, thus failing to link television to its full historical context.

A typical historical approach most often uses television like *The Cosby Show* as evidence of a larger thesis being argued. In *Age of Fracture*, Daniel T. Rodgers cites *The Cosby Show*'s success along with that of Oprah Winfrey, Toni Morrison, and Michael Jackson as evidence of "African Americans' new assertiveness of voice and visibility" in popular and intellectual culture.¹⁵ Rodgers's book is brilliant, deep, and influential for this dissertation, but to extract just one broad theme from a widely known show of the time fails to explore the extent of *The Cosby*

¹⁴ Brooks and Marsh, 1692.

¹⁵ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 114-116.

Show's true cultural significance. Of course, such an exploration is not part of Rodgers's project, but the example demonstrates the way cultural historians often use television. Despite the elevation of television as a serious area of examination in media studies, communications, and English departments over the past quarter century, television remains underappreciated as a potent source of evidence for historians.

Media studies, itself an interdisciplinary field, includes a wide variety of approaches to studying television. While many of these approaches do historicize television fairly well, most have a tendency to neglect TV's broader context. For example, Linda K. Fuller's *The Cosby Show* diligently presents the story of the show's creation, production, and reception without fully examining its broader place in the culture of the eighties.¹⁶

Another media studies approach attempts to study what television reveals about one specific cultural issue or theme, leading to a very narrow, limited contextualization. For example *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* connects the show to perceptions of race in America in the late eighties and early nineties.¹⁷ Its authors Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis use empirical analysis of the show's audience to raise provocative points about the limits of *The Cosby Show* in breaking down racial stereotypes. Their qualitative approach offers rich conclusions about issues of race and class, but fails to discuss changes in ideas about family and community as well as developments in the sitcom genre.¹⁸

¹⁶ Linda K. Fuller, *The Cosby Show: Audiences, Impact, and Implications* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992).

¹⁸ For a broader yet nicely historicized history of the sitcom, see David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

Textual analysis, another common method within media studies, traces its roots back into English departments. Taken to its extreme, such an approach may completely ignore context. Closer to my methodology, June M. Frazer and Timothy C. Frazer's essay "'Father Knows Best' and 'The Cosby Show: Nostalgia and the Sitcom Tradition'" compares the substance of two popular shows across time, emphasizing the persistence of traditional gender roles in sitcoms.¹⁹ Once again, this short essay does not set out to explain fully the historical significance of *The Cosby Show*, but even its narrow conclusions are limited by the essay's neglect of the varied history of the sitcom genre as well as *The Cosby Show*'s complex intersections with race, family, and class in the 1980s.

The most fruitful way to approach television is a hybrid approach, combining a careful textual analysis with an equally careful understanding of historical context. Furthermore, employing this hybrid approach to several contemporary television shows helps reveal thematic continuities across TV in a certain period. One good example of the hybrid approach this dissertation employs is found in a book that explores not the nineties but the eighties. Jane Feuer's *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* attempts to understand several different eighties programs for how they relate to politics, gender, and class in the Reagan Era.²⁰ Feuer analyzes shows like *L.A. Law* for what they reveal about the context within which they were created as well as how they may have influenced the ways Americans thought about themselves and their world.

Findings

¹⁹ June M. Frazer and Timothy C. Frazer, "'Father Knows Best' and 'The Cosby Show: Nostalgia and the Sitcom Tradition,'" *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 3 (Winter 1993), 163.

²⁰ Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

Using a similar interdisciplinary approach, this dissertation begins after the Berlin Wall fell, investigating the television shows that replaced *The Cosby Show*, *Cheers*, and *L.A. Law* at the top of the charts in the 1990s. I explore how nineties television is distinctive from television of other periods, why those distinctions exist, and why they matter. Further, I suggest the television of the decade indicates how the nineties themselves were different from other periods.

Nineties television depicts lonely characters. That is not to say these characters are often alone; after all, the medium relies on two or more characters to speak scripted dialogue. Nor is it true that nineties characters frequently express a feeling of loneliness, at least not explicitly. Nineties television characters are *existentially* lonely. They are isolated, emotionally and socially, for several reasons. First, many of the television shows I examine depict characters who are preoccupied with their own problems. Self-absorption is a common character trait, and more emphasized in the shows I examine than similar television shows in other decades.

Many nineties television characters experience problematic or unstable relationships with their families. Other characters simply de-emphasize their relationships with their families, finding more intimate, supportive, and fulfilling relationships with friends or coworkers. Still, families are the essential unit for several popular nineties sitcoms this dissertation does not examine, as well as the foundation for *The Simpsons*, the subject of my final chapter. However, as I will argue, the stability of the family unit seen on *The Simpsons* is only visible over the long run of the show as its central characters stick together despite family dysfunction. In other nineties comedies and dramas, family is often absent, replaced by family-like bonds with friends or co-workers. Nineties television thus depicts the ambiguous state of the American family at the end of the century, and offers visions of how characters address this development by forming other intimate relationships.

Nineties television also depicts a greater isolation between the American individual and his surrounding community. Television characters, preoccupied with their own personal crises, rarely pay attention to social issues of the period. Sitcom characters dwell on the minutiae of their daily social interactions, giving little thought to larger community problems. Even dramas about police and doctors tend to focus on their characters' personal lives rather than the sources of the community problems it was their job to address. Meanwhile, these shows also indicate the decrease in crime and the improvement of quality of life in American cities during the nineties. The audience, thus freed from concerns about social problems, could similarly remain preoccupied with their own personal issues.

Television's depiction of lonely characters is only part of the story. Many of the shows examined here expressed a concern with these very themes of individual isolation, familial brokenness, and civic disengagement. As I discuss below in this introduction, many of these concerns resemble observations made by a variety of scholars and cultural critics at the end of the twentieth century. The dissertation argues that television is an active and powerful voice in Americans' lives, one that shapes thinking and conversation about problems of community. I do not attempt to claim with certainty how or to what degree television changed viewers' ideas and actions. Nevertheless, I do believe Americans' weekly engagement with the characters and stories on their favorite shows influenced their thinking about community in some fashion. By identifying intersections between imagined content on television and problems of community in reality, I suggest television shaped its audience's perceptions of community problems with which they were already familiar, or even made viewers aware of problems they had not previously considered.

Furthermore, some of the shows offered solutions to these problems of community. Sometimes, television suggested individual isolation was indeed a reasonable response to anxieties faced in the wider community. In other cases, television promoted trust in America's civil authorities or faith in an even higher power to solve America's social problems. I argue that several of these shows presented solutions that ran somewhat counter to the cultural discourse of the decade. *The X-Files*, for example, suggests the fruitful possibilities that could result from a partnership between the two seemingly irreconcilable sides of the decade's culture wars.

A final goal of this dissertation is to assess the messages and meanings television transmitted to its audience in the final decade when, unlike the early years of the 21st century, TV remained a largely simultaneous experience of mass culture. As I will describe towards the end of this introduction, new communications technologies continued to fragment television's audience through the end of the decade. So, just as television became increasingly fragmented, its shows were *already* depicting a fragmented community within an America which, *itself*, was in the midst of a fragmented age.

Chapters

Focusing on one or two popular nineties television shows per chapter, this project examines each show's (1) ideology, (2) genre, and (3) context. A close study of the words and actions of characters throughout the entirety of a television series reveals patterns of behavior as well as articulations of belief that combine to suggest the show's ideology. Rather than merely summarize the entirety of each series, every chapter applies a deep reading of scenes, characters, or episodes which epitomize the ideology of the series. "Ideology" is, of course, a highly contested term, a word which has seemingly broadened in its usage with each successive

generation.²¹ I use the term throughout the dissertation as, simply, a *system of ideas* that guides the behavior of characters within the social formation of their particular show.²²

Each chapter examines one or two television shows intentionally selected as representative of a particular television genre. Comparing one show to other series within the genre situates it within television history. Also, exploring how the show engages with themes in American life that have been recurring within its particular genre helps illuminate ideological shifts over time.

My examination of a show's context is multifaceted. A discussion of other similar contemporary programming helps reveal the significance of each show to its period in television. Also, in an effort to pin the imaginings of each show to reality, the first four chapters connect each show to a relevant trend, event, person, or debate. While this dissertation does not draw definitive conclusions about how the American audience received the visions these shows presented, critical and fan discourse about each show is included where it can help reveal some of the ideas each show presented to its audience.²³ Finally, each show is analyzed for what it reveals about the particular problems of community Americans faced in the late 20th century.

²¹ Louis Althusser began to move the term away from its Marxist origins and towards a broader definition, describing ideology as the way people imagine themselves in relation to their realities. Althusser's "ideology" is almost a synonym for "culture." Ultimately, "ideology" seems like a better word than "culture," "philosophy," or "principles" to describe the system of ideas I observe on television shows because it suggests a broad fabric of worldviews that consistently yet often implicitly influences characters' social interactions. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 121-176.

²² As Mimi White sums up, "Marxist scholarship in mass communication, especially before 1980, overwhelmingly centered on economic and institutional analysis of media systems. ...But ideological analysis must also focus on television as a system of representation through which individuals experience and understand their world." Mimi White, "Ideological Analysis and Television," Robert Clyde Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 161-202.

²³ Many media studies practitioners attempt to employ quantitative analysis, interviews, and other social science methods to draw conclusions about audience reception. While many of these studies are rich and even persuasive, I am ultimately an agnostic when it comes to the possibility of truly knowing how a show is received. I am particularly skeptical of purely quantitative arguments that seek to prove a

Through a deep reading of these shows and their particular visions of community, I identify points where the fictional intersects reality. I thus suggest where television may have influenced the ways Americans thought about themselves in relation to their friends, families, localities, and nation. The characters on *Seinfeld* (Chapter 1) largely abandon bonds with their closest relatives, finding their most intimate community in a small group of friends. Many other sitcoms created during and after *Seinfeld*'s success depict a similar friends-as-family community. Seemingly as a byproduct of focusing their social lives on their community of a small group of friends, the characters are unable and even unwilling to engage with their neighbors and their local community in a meaningful way.

Meanwhile, *N.Y.P.D. Blue*'s characters (Chapter 2) work in urban institutions servicing cities that provide an endless supply of crime, sickness, and injury. Many of the protagonists on this and other dramas in the nineties behave according to the ideals of mythic American individualism, relying on their own abilities to help them succeed. Over the course of the series, though, this self-reliance leads to destruction of both self and family. Only when such characters allow their workplace-as-family to manage and even suppress their individualism can they rebuild their own broken lives and most effectively serve the larger urban community.

Law & Order (Chapter 3) neglects the private lives of its main characters, as the justice system itself is the main focus of the series. The system effectively processes society's disorder so that most Americans (the audience) can pursue happiness free from fear of lawlessness. The

correlation between television viewing and other social behavior. For example, George A. Comstock and Erica Scharrer, *Television: What's On, Who's Watching, and What It Means* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999) synthesizes a variety of quantitative studies. One chapter concludes, "[Watching television] not only interferes with and displaces scholastic endeavors but also shapes the motives and directs the preferences of the young toward the trivial and the banal." Another confirms, "[The Surgeon General] was correct in arguing that arguing that television violence increases aggressiveness." My objection, simply put: causality is *much* more complicated. For more on the prickly problem of reception and how this dissertation deals with it, see the final the final section of this introduction.

show celebrates the justice system's procedure in dealing with society's broken people, letting Americans off the hook from worrying about their own role in building a better society, and freeing them to live the sort of self-interested life depicted in *Seinfeld*.

The characters on friends-as-family sitcoms, like *Seinfeld*, along with the characters in dramas set in urban institutions, like *N.Y.P.D. Blue* and *Law & Order*, are too preoccupied with their own local problems to confront larger questions of human existence. Two other popular shows address such questions directly. *Touched by an Angel* and *The X-Files* (Chapter 4) both depict firm belief in the existence of a higher power, though each show presents different ways of living out that belief. *Touched by an Angel* advocates faith in God as a therapeutic healer primarily interested in fixing broken families, one of the central concerns of many nineties television shows. *The X-Files* seeks a peaceful middle ground in the culture wars where both science and faith can work together to solve the universe's toughest questions.

Finally, *The Simpsons* (Chapter 5), ostensibly a cynical satire of American society and all its brokenness, ultimately presents its audience a vision of a utopian community. All of the faults of the Simpsons and their community are overcome through consistent love of family and neighbor. Nineties popular television thus presented a variety of depictions of life in America to its audience, ranging from individual disillusionment to communal hope.

Source Selection

I have tried to select the most culturally significant television shows of the nineties. Primarily, this selection is based on popularity as indicated in the industry-standard Nielsen ratings. All but two of the shows chosen were ranked in the top ten of Nielsen's annual ratings at

some point in the period 1990 to 2001.²⁴ For its final four seasons on air (1994-1998), *Seinfeld* was the most watched sitcom on television.²⁵ *N.Y.P.D. Blue* peaked at seventh in the ratings at the end of its second season (1994-95) and remained among the top fifteen television shows through 2000. *Touched by an Angel* reached the top ten in its third season (1996-97) and remained there through 2000. *Law & Order* was on the air for over a decade before it reached its peak ranking of fifth for the 2001-02 season. That ranking was a signal not of *Law & Order*'s growth in popularity but its consistency; the series hovered around a 12.0 rating from 1994 to 2003.²⁶ Not coincidentally, 1994 was the first season *Law & Order* started appearing in syndication on cable where it remains ubiquitous to this day, allowing viewers to watch and re-watch old episodes.

The argument for the inclusion of the two exceptions to that “top ten” rule—*The Simpsons* and *The X-Files*—is fairly straightforward. These two shows were Fox's biggest hits, and helped the new network, in existence since 1985, close the gap on the “Big Three” in the Nielsen ratings. The fact that *The Simpsons* was able to crack the Nielsen top 30 in its first season (1989-90) is indicative of its immediate cultural impact. The following year, Fox moved *The Simpsons* to Thursday night where it went head-to-head with *The Cosby Show* and managed to survive. Indeed, for the first half of the nineties, *The Simpsons* was the only Fox show to reach the top thirty. *The X-Files* was the second, making the list in its fourth season (1996-97) and

²⁴ Brooks and Marsh, 1692-3.

²⁵ The only audiences higher than *Seinfeld*'s series finale in the nineties were Super Bowls, the Nancy Kerrigan-Tonya Harding 1994 Winter Olympics spectacle, and *Cheers*'s 1993 finale. Bill Gorman, “Top 100 Rated TV Shows of All Time,” TV by the Numbers, March 21, 2009, accessed November 7, 2014, <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2009/03/21/top-100-rated-tv-shows-of-all-time/14922/>.

²⁶ *Law & Order*'s rise up the ratings charts without increasing its average rating point reveals the fragmentation of the television audience over the decade. Because the American TV audience was watching a larger quantity of television shows, the rating needed to finish high in the rankings shrank. The other pieces of the pie shrank, making *Law & Order*'s consistent slice appear relatively larger.

reaching its peak at 19th the following year. Meanwhile, in 1993 Fox had surprised the industry by outbidding CBS for its rights to broadcast the National Football League. By fall 1996, both *The Simpsons* and *The X-Files* had moved to Fox's Sunday night schedule following an afternoon of heavy football viewership. These were the two most popular Fox series in the period, and two shows with a cultural significance on par with the other series under analysis.

The dissertation also discusses several other extremely popular nineties shows tangentially. The *Seinfeld* chapter contains some analysis of *Friends*, the highest rated sitcom on television after *Seinfeld*'s finale until *Friends* itself concluded in 2004. Similarly, the *N.Y.P.D. Blue* chapter discusses *ER*, another key show after *Seinfeld* and *Friends* on NBC's still-dominant Thursday night schedule, and the highest rated drama of the decade.

Of course, neither my analysis of television nor my selection of texts is purely scientific. I have done some curating, and a few of the most popular shows of the period have been left out. Some are holdovers from the 1980s, including *The Cosby Show* and *Cheers*, and thus are better suited to a hypothetical prequel to this study. *Cheers* is analyzed briefly in juxtaposition to *Seinfeld*. *Frasier* (NBC, 1993-2004), a top-20 show from its debut through the end of the decade, was perhaps the third-most consistently rated sitcom of the decade after *Seinfeld* and *Friends*. In *Frasier*, a spin-off of *Cheers*, the titular psychologist moves to Seattle to live with his father and near his brother, and to host a radio talk show. The show offers its own unique depiction of community, but in several ways it resembles *Seinfeld* more than *Cheers*; as we will see, the downtown coffee shops frequented by characters on *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Frasier* help reveal these shows' ideologies. In this way, *Seinfeld* can be considered broadly representative of many nineties sitcoms, including *Frasier*.

Another hit nineties comedy, *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-97), became the top rated sitcom in 1991 and 1992. Creator and star Roseanne Barr's portrayal of a strong, fast-talking woman at the center of a blue collar family was unique in its time. Meanwhile, there was another spunky, independent female lead character in *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-98), which finished as high as third in 1991-92. These two popular sitcoms reveal much about the role of women and perceptions of gender in the nineties. However, *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons* are more influential shows for the sitcom genre in the nineties. *Seinfeld* launched a thousand sitcom pilots about single buddies living in the city, including *Friends*. *The Simpsons* started a surge of cartoons on primetime television.²⁷ *Roseanne* inspired few series beyond the mildly popular *Grace Under Fire* (ABC, 1993-98).²⁸

The sitcoms featuring a strong female character had their counterparts; several comedies focused on a central male character struggling to maintain his manhood in late 20th century America when traditional assumptions about a male's role in society were under attack. *Home Improvement* (ABC, 1991-98) was in the top ten of Nielsen's season-long ratings for all eight of the seasons it was on the air. The show is about a hyper-masculine, power-tool loving dad (he even grunted like a caveman) learning to be a more "modern," sensitive, thoughtful male. *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS, 1996-2005) peaked in the ratings across the end of the period, hitting a high of fourth in its 2001-02 season. Raymond is caught in the middle of a tug of war for control of his life between his wife and his mother who lived across the street. This "crisis in

²⁷ For example, *Beavis and Butthead* (MTV, 1993-1997, 2011-2012), *King of the Hill* (Fox, 1997-2010), *South Park* (Comedy Central, 1997-present), and *Family Guy* (Fox, 1999-2002, 2005-present). *The Simpsons* also arguably influenced other live action sitcoms with a cartoonish worldview, including *3rd Rock from the Sun* (NBC, 1996-2001), *Malcolm in the Middle* (Fox, 2000-2006), and *Scrubs* (NBC, 2001-08; ABC, 2009-10). Like *The Simpsons* and the animated sitcoms that followed it, *Malcolm in the Middle* and *Scrubs* aired with no laugh track.

²⁸ After debuting as the top-rated new show of the 1993-94 season, *Grace Under Fire* faded down the ratings chart from its third through its fifth season partly because of creator and star Brett Butler's struggle with substance abuse. Joe Flint, "Sad fall for 'Grace Under Fire,'" *Entertainment Weekly*, September 12, 1997.

masculinity” is an important theme in nineties American culture; it is visible in films, too, as the bulked-up Hollywood superheroes of the eighties (Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone) gave way to the relatively scrawnier male protagonists of nineties action movies (Nicholas Cage, Denzel Washington).²⁹ I discuss some of these gender issues as part of chapter five’s analysis of *The Simpsons*. That show grapples with late 20th century, postmodern complications undermining the traditional family structure more broadly than any other family sitcom in the decade

Selecting dramas was somewhat easier; sitcoms predominated in the network schedules and the Nielsen ratings throughout the period, meaning fewer dramas cracked the top of the charts. A couple of hit dramas from the eighties came to an end in the early nineties, including *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-91) and *L.A. Law. Murder, She Wrote* (CBS, 1984-96) out-rated both of those series during its run, ranking in the top 15 every single season it aired except its last, when it was moved out of its Sunday night timeslot to Thursday, opposite NBC’s *Friends*. CBS canceled the series at the end of the season mainly because, in sharp contrast to *Friends*, viewer demographics skewed heavily to an older audience. The dramas discussed in this dissertation simply had a broader appeal than *Murder, She Wrote*.³⁰

The West Wing’s (NBC, 1999-2006) success came at the transition point of my selected period; its top rated season was 2001-02, when it finished eighth. That was the same year *JAG* (CBS, 1995-2005) peaked in the ratings at 14th. *JAG* was about a lawyer in the Navy’s Judge Advocate General’s Office who stumbled into action and drama while investigating military

²⁹ For more on the crisis of masculinity in nineties film, see Phillip E. Wegner, *Life between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (Durham, NC, 2009).

³⁰ The series itself bitterly referenced its fate in the title of its final episode, “Death by Demographics,” *Murder, She Wrote*, season 12, episode 24 (CBS, May 19, 1996).

cases. *JAG*, like *The West Wing*, would offer a depiction of America and Americans working on behalf of their country on a national and international setting. Both shows thus have much to reveal about national identity, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11, but because their popularity crested after my period of analysis, I have set them aside.³¹

Throughout its history, through the nineties and up until very recently, American network television has struggled both to create shows with minority characters and to air shows that appealed to minority audiences along with white viewers. All of the dramas discussed in this dissertation featured many prominent black characters alongside a few other minorities. On the other hand, nineties sitcoms, especially *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, were notorious even while they aired for their lack of black characters and black viewers.³² The year *Seinfeld* went off the air, the three highest rated shows among black audiences were all canceled.³³ Still, even people who never watched *Seinfeld* had heard of the show. Several news articles focused on the reaction to *Seinfeld*'s finale from black and Latino Americans who had never watched the show, but there were no such corresponding articles asking white Americans for their response to the cancellation of *Living Single* (Fox, 1993-98).³⁴

³¹ If I could include one more chapter to this work, it would be on *Northern Exposure* (1990-95, CBS). In its middle three seasons, the show finished 16th, 11th, and 14th in the ratings, the second most popular drama after *Murder, She Wrote* in that period. The show would make an excellent last chapter, offering a utopian vision of an American small town made of diverse people striving to live together in community. For the sake of holding the dissertation to a manageable five chapters, I have left out *Northern Exposure*.

³² *The X-Files* is perhaps the whitest drama discussed in the dissertation, as there were only two main characters on the show through the end of the decade, both of them white. The show did feature black actors in many episodes, including a few who played recurring characters.

³³ Those shows were two sitcoms *Living Single* (Fox, 1993-98) and *Between Brothers* (Fox, 1997-98), and one drama, *413 Hope St.* (Fox, 1997-98). Not coincidentally, all three shows aired on Fox; the fourth-place network had deliberately sought to program for a neglected audience. As Fox's overall viewership grew towards the end of the decade, its support for black television shows dissipated. A brand new broadcast network, UPN (founded in 1995), took up this mantle, airing new shows featuring black characters. It even picked up cast-offs, showing unaired episodes of *Between Brothers*, for example.

³⁴ Greg Braxton, "For Many Black Viewers, 'Seinfeld's' End is Nonevent," *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1998. Amy Alexander, "Not Everyone Will Miss 'Seinfeld;' Some Resent Paucity of Black Faces," *Boston Globe*, January 30, 1998, C1.

The “whiteness” of the most popular shows in the nineties as well as their white-skewing demographics are important limits on my analysis of these shows and their relationship to American culture. Fortunately, other media scholars and historians have not neglected the nineties shows that many minorities *were* watching.³⁵ Within this dissertation, race is a crucial theme in my analysis of *N.Y.P.D. Blue* in chapter two.

Ultimately, I have tried to choose the most culturally influential shows of the nineties. As my analysis seeks to explore each show in depth, I believe my selection lends the greatest possible breadth to my study of the theme of community on nineties American television.

Lonely Bowling

At the end of the nineties Robert Putnam published his famous book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.³⁶ Putnam uses changing patterns of recreational bowling in America to sum up the results of his quantitative study. While bowling remained a popular activity into the nineties, far fewer Americans were joining bowling leagues. Americans were more likely to bowl alone, or at least they were more likely to bowl with pre-existing friends rather than make new social connections by joining a league. Putnam concludes that, as Americans participated in fewer community activities, social capital and civic engagement also declined in America from the end of the 1960s through the 1990s.

The problems Putnam observed in American community were also appearing on television in the nineties. *Seinfeld*, for example, reflects some developments charted in *Bowling*

³⁵ A few examples include: Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); David J. Leonard, and Lisa Guerrero, *African Americans on Television: Race-Ing for Ratings* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013); Clara E. Rodriguez, *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

³⁶ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

Alone. The characters' collective disdain for the people around them, culminating in the series finale with their imprisonment for, essentially, being horrible citizens, epitomizes the 1996 survey quoted in *Bowling Alone* that 80% of Americans thought people were less civil than they were ten years before.³⁷ Surely *Seinfeld*'s sharp observational humor *affirmed* that worldview for many viewers, leading a portion of the audience to believe they knew a lot of people just like the characters on the show, and another portion of the audience to believe they themselves were justified in thinking and even behaving like the characters on the show. Most obviously, *Seinfeld*'s language pervaded American culture: "Soup Nazi," "close-talker," "shrinkage." Less quotable ideas can similarly move from television series to cultural consciousness and sub-consciousness.

While *Seinfeld* resembled and may have even promoted the decline of social behavior Putnam described, television also presented exceptions, alternatives, and even solutions to the problems Putnam observed. Around the time Putnam was working on the 1995 essay that he would eventually turn into *Bowling Alone*, Homer Simpson, in one episode of *The Simpsons*, declared, "I'm tired of being a wannabe league bowler! I wannabe a league bowler!"³⁸ Homer proceeds to form a bowling team and join a league, in the process competing against and interacting with a diverse array of neighbors. In this case, *The Simpsons* presents a competing vision to the reality Putnam observes. The episode does not refute Putnam's statistics, but it does offer its audience a vision of the rich experience of participating in a community activity.

Television and the Communitarian Critique

³⁷ Putnam, 25.

³⁸ "Team Homer," *The Simpsons*, episode 12, season seven (Fox, January 7, 1996). Given the Ivy League pedigree of *The Simpsons* writing staff, and the density of literary allusions that appear in their scripts, it is not inconceivable one of them had come across Putnam's original essay: Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy*, 6:1 (January 1995), 65-78.

Bowling Alone is one example from an expansive body of scholarship that has come to be referred to as “communitarian.” In the second half of the 20th century, sociologists, historians, and other writers increasingly observed a decline in America’s social life. As the examples from *Bowling Alone* demonstrate, the work of these social critics helps to shed light on both the forms of and flaws in community in nineties television. I will discuss some of their broader cultural assessments to foreground several issues in community I observe running through nineties primetime television. The following discussion of communitarian themes also includes several other writers who are not associated with the communitarian critique, but whose work helps explain community fragmentation at the end of the 20th century.

In geopolitics, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union unleashed long-suppressed identity conflicts around the world as well as questions about America’s role in the post-Cold War world. Among American intellectuals, this moment sparked a flurry of works pondering the significance of the event, grappling with the sudden ambiguity of America’s place in an equally ambiguous new context. The oft-neglected question mark in the title of Francis Fukuyama’s famous essay, “The End of History?” underscores this period of searching.³⁹ A decaying of self-certainty seemed to be the core feature of the postmodern era in general. Daniel Bell sensed this rising ambiguity in *The End of Ideology* decades before Fukuyama.⁴⁰ On the eve of America’s ideologically-inspired foray into Vietnam, Bell argued old ideologies were exhausted. A quarter century later, as the global clash between the two great political ideologies of the time approached its resolution, intellectuals debated whether America and the world had entered a postmodern period. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François

³⁹ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* (Summer 1989), 3-18.

⁴⁰ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (New York: The Free Press, 1960).

Lyotard offered a definition of postmodernism as “incredulity toward meta-narratives,”⁴¹ adding the observation that in this period, “consensus is a horizon never reached.”⁴² The end of the Cold War was thus the last curtain to fall on an era of grand ideologies, mythologies, and meta-narratives capable of unifying communities of people.

The end of the Cold War also freed Americans from worrying about the bomb so they could further concentrate their anxieties on themselves. The characters on *Seinfeld* were obsessed with their inner turmoil and sought emotional refuge from their social anxieties by detaching from their wider community. Other shows, particularly *N.Y.P.D. Blue* and *Touched by an Angel*, concentrated on the path to heal characters’ inner brokenness. Avoiding a confrontation with the elusiveness of firm religious doctrine in the postmodern age, *Touched by an Angel* offered a vague theology that encouraged simple belief in the existence of an invisible God’s helping hand. The main characters in *The X-Files*, by contrast, struggled mightily for a firmly grounded meaning for humanity’s existence amidst postmodernity’s uncertainty. The show also followed a trend visible in Hollywood’s blockbusters, finding an even greater evil than the defunct Soviet Union in both international conspiracies and extraterrestrial beings.

Perhaps the clearest imagining of potential community offered to America in the second half of the 20th century came from a social activist who often relied on television news to present Southern racism and oppression to a national audience.⁴³ Martin Luther King, Jr. called for an American community that rejected both racial divisions and economic disparity. A community of equality and harmony, King argued, could only be achieved through the Christian ideal of

⁴¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984), xxiv.

⁴² Lyotard, 61.

⁴³ Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

neighborly love.⁴⁴ Over time, the black Civil Rights effort, feminism, and other related movements would grow increasingly radical and fragmented, turning towards the politics of identity-based power and away from King's unifying vision of community.

The student movement of the 1960s and early 1970s would follow a similar arc, and it was in the wake of the failures of the New Left,⁴⁵ and against the background of economic stagnation, that the communitarian critique emerged, offering a deeper diagnoses of American community. Tom Wolfe called the period the "Me" Decade. While his 1976 piece captured many of the peculiarities of a certain moment in time, the cultural roots of the self-absorption Wolfe observed reached decades backwards and continued into the nineties and beyond.⁴⁶ While previous cultural critics from Karl Marx to Charlie Chaplin had envisioned the isolation of the human self in an urban industrial context, Wolfe realized the 30-year post-war boom had given a vast majority of Americans the disposable income, leisure time, and suburban space to turn their attention to themselves to an unprecedented degree. Wolfe saw this new drive for self-improvement as a Third Great Awakening manifesting itself in the forms of hippie communes, self-help groups, Scientology, and more. By the nineties, most of these movements had drifted to the periphery of American culture. A few found a lasting place by shedding their more ecstatic characteristics and, as Wolfe described the 19th century transformation of Mormonism, "[winding] down to the slow, firm beat of respectability."

⁴⁴ King's "I Have a Dream" speech (August 28, 1963) is the most obvious example of his utopian vision, but for me, the best example of King's prescriptive on how Americans could and should behave towards one another is found in one of his final sermons, "The Drum Major Instinct," (February 4, 1968).

⁴⁵ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987).

⁴⁶ Tom Wolfe, "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening," *New York* (August 23, 1976), accessed November 15, 2013, <http://nymag.com/news/features/45938/>.

Other cultural critics of the 1970s joined Wolfe with similar observations that remained relevant into the nineties. Philip Slater noted engagement, dependency, and community continued to decline as a result of the excessive individualist values in American social character.⁴⁷ Daniel Bell critiqued the rise of hedonism and sense of entitlement in American society as America entered a late-capitalist economy with a growing service industry.⁴⁸ Christopher Lasch observed Americans had replaced a religiously-based system of communal ethics with a solitary search for therapeutic self-fulfillment.⁴⁹ American culture, from advertising to self-help books to political style, encouraged a belief that the key to personal happiness was the satisfaction of wants. Care for the self, rather than the community, was of the utmost concern. Lasch's description of "a narcissistic preoccupation with the self" is mentioned in many critical and scholarly examinations of *Seinfeld*, but at least that show, unlike many of its imitators in the nineties, ultimately presented a critique of its narcissistic characters.⁵⁰

Philip Rieff was a key influence on one of Lasch's fundamental points, that "the contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious," a point which differentiated Lasch's view from Wolfe's.⁵¹ In *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Rieff described how the erosion of the Christian worldview and its accompanying basis of community order left western societies ungrounded, lacking a unifying faith to motivate their social behavior. Rieff saw Freud's theories of human behavior moving into this vacuum, resulting in a therapeutic culture—one where

⁴⁷ Philip Elliot Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness; American Culture at the Breaking Point* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970).

⁴⁸ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

⁴⁹ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978).

⁵⁰ Lasch, xv. As an example of a review of *Seinfeld* that mentions *Culture of Narcissism*, see Scott McLemee, "'Seinfeld': Much Ado about Nothing," *Seattle Times*, May 14, 1998.

⁵¹ Lasch, 7.

individuals were motivated by the promise of fulfillment not from an external source but from within. Individuals sought self-satisfaction in work, leisure, and family, seeking to satisfy their own wants and emotions rather than aspiring to live a life based on faith or other social codes of morality.⁵²

Rather than guide social behavior as King suggested it should, religion now seems to serve the therapeutic needs of the self more than the social needs of the community. In *Touched by an Angel*, the most religiously-themed show on nineties network television, God responds to the problems of Americans by sending angels in human disguise. These angels bring a therapeutic message to help mend broken relationships amongst family members, but they offer few other clues beyond basic God-inspired human decency about how to live together in community. *The X-Files* did more to explore existential questions as its main characters, using both science and faith, strove to defeat the darkness encroaching a skeptical, uncertain society.

Were the nineties a lonelier decade than most? Was the crisis of community worse in this period? The communitarians suggest, by the post-Cold War period, community bonds were looser and individuals had become increasingly unmoored from society in a variety of ways. They argue that the direction of American culture was dangerously flawed and in need of correction. In their own way, nineties television shows offered an imagined sense of the direction of American culture. Television presented variations of the problems in American community, suggested ways to cope with these problems, and, occasionally, proposed ways to solve them.

⁵² Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic; Uses of Faith after Freud*, (1966; repr., ed. Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006). Some other relevant uses of Rieff include T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," in Richard Wightman Fox and Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983); and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, *Race Experts: How Racial Etiquette, Sensitivity Training, and New Age Therapy Hijacked the Civil Rights Revolution*, (New York: Norton, 2001).

Historiography: Fragmentation or Polarization

A number of cultural and intellectual historians researching 20th century America have sought to trace and explain the cultural fragmentation over which the communitarians have expressed such concern.⁵³ I have already mentioned Rodgers's *Age of Fracture*, which asserts that in American intellectual life over the last decades of the century, "the dominant tendency of the age was toward disaggregation."⁵⁴

Rodgers's thesis, describing a more scattered intellectual landscape, diverges from several other authors who have followed up on James Davison Hunter's 1991 observation of America divided into two sides of the nation's "culture wars."⁵⁵ Andrew Hartman's *A War for the Soul of America* argues that either relativism or certainty defines the way Americans perceive the world, thus causing the political division of the culture wars.⁵⁶ James Livingston suggests the left has in fact dominated America's ideological landscape since the sixties, maintaining a powerful influence on American culture through realms such as academia and popular culture.⁵⁷ Aligning more closely with Rogers's thesis, this dissertation argues that late twentieth century American culture is best described in terms of fragmentation rather than Hartman's and Livingston's portrayal of polarization.⁵⁸ Still, as I will discuss in chapter four, the *sense* of a

⁵³ In this historiographic overview I aim to present the key works for understanding of the context of nineties television, particularly those most related to the themes I discuss in each chapter. The bibliography mentions many more.

⁵⁴ Rodgers, 5.

⁵⁵ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991).

⁵⁶ Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁵⁷ James Livingston, *The World Turned Inside Out: American Thought and Culture at the End of the 20th Century*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010).

⁵⁸ Other key works on the culture wars include: Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012); Van Gosse and Richard R. Moser, eds., *The World the Sixties Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); and David T. Courtwright, *No Right Turn Conservative Politics in a Liberal America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

polarized nation divided by the culture wars is particularly important in understanding how shows like *The X-Files* and *Touched by an Angel* deal with religious faith.

Broader histories of American history in the nineties are just beginning to emerge. Haynes Johnson's narrative overview of the decade, *The Best of Times*, explores four main themes from the period: the rise of new technology, America's celebrity culture, Bill Clinton's political scandals, and the economy's ebb and flow.⁵⁹ Johnson suggests the nation was too distracted by relatively trivial episodes like the O.J. Simpson trial and the Monica Lewinsky scandal to take full advantage of the era of peace and prosperity after the end of the Cold war. Revising his book soon after the September 11, 2001 attacks, Johnson sees 9/11 as a political and cultural turning point, though his analysis of nineties popular culture is not extensive.

Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier refute the American collective memory of the pre-9/11 period as a brief era of relative calm between two periods of tension in American foreign policy. Their book, *America between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11*, offers a narrative depiction of the period at odds with the "years of repose, years of sabbatical" described by President George W. Bush in his second inaugural address.⁶⁰ September 11, 2001 was not the most important "historical pivot" behind the global problems faced by the United States in the early 21st century; rather, "It is the legacy of 11/9—and the uncertainties, hopes, confusion, threats, and opportunities it produced—that we still live with today."⁶¹

University Press, 2010). Prior to the publication of his book on the subject, Hartman discussed these and other related works in a brief historiographical essay on the Society for U.S. Intellectual History's blog: Hartman, "An Emerging Historiography of the Culture Wars," U.S. Intellectual History Blog, January 29, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://s-usih.org/2013/01/an-emerging-historiography-of-the-culture->

⁵⁹ Haynes Johnson, *The Best of Times: The Boom and Bust Years of America before and after Everything Changed* (New York: Harvest Book—Harcourt, 2002).

⁶⁰ Derek H. Chollet and James M. Goldgeier, *America between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11: the Misunderstood Years between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror* (New York: BBS PublicAffairs, 2008).

⁶¹ Chollet and Goldgeier, xi-xii.

While Chollet and Goldgeier cover foreign policy and politics in the nineties, Philip Wegner explores novels, film, and television of the period in *Life between Two Deaths, 1989-2001*. Wegner's thesis is that September 11, 2001 was an important moment because it disrupted a period when popular culture imagined, in a wide variety of forms, new possibilities of community. Throughout the study, Wegner intertwines his analysis of popular culture with an assortment of cultural theories, including those of Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek. While Wegner meanders through ideas of the period in a way that is intriguing and stimulating, his analysis of popular culture follows a tendency of media studies in not fully contextualizing his rich textual analysis. Still, besides his provocative arguments, Wegner's simple yet keen observation that genres are like periodizations in that both "force us to think comparatively and historically" is one pillar of his approach that I did take to heart.⁶²

In the first scholarly work amidst the stacks of books written on Bill Clinton by journalists and political commentators, David H. Bennett's *Bill Clinton: Building a Bridge to the New Millennium* argues that Clinton's success, both in elections and in governing, stemmed from his ability to seek a middle ground amidst the nation's increasingly polarized politics.⁶³ In other words, Bennett suggests Clinton was well-suited to navigate the tricky waters of the culture wars, even as the Monica Lewinski sex scandal enraged the political right and almost derailed the Presidency.

For the traditionalist side of the culture wars, Clinton's lax sexual morality epitomized the breakdown in so-called "traditional family values" from which America was suffering. At the

⁶² Wegner, 8.

⁶³ David Harry Bennett, *Bill Clinton: Building a Bridge to the New Millennium* (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2014). For a fairly brisk chronological narrative of the decade's key events that uses Clinton as the period's lynchpin, see Gil Troy, *The Age of Clinton: America in the 1990s* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2015).

same time, scholars such as Stephanie Coontz in her 1992 book, *The Way We Never Were*, argued that the “traditional American family” was a myth.⁶⁴ Coontz followed this with *The Way We Really Are*, which discusses the complex make-up of families in late 20th century America, a quality many television shows explored in the nineties.⁶⁵

Literature: Nineties Television

One of the challenges of this dissertation is that there has been so much written about these shows precisely because they were so popular. Rather than presenting an exhaustive literature review, I will instead briefly characterize the existing scholarship on each show, demonstrating how this project attempts to link the media studies scholarship with the broader history of the U.S. in the nineties.⁶⁶

Seinfeld, the subject of the first chapter, and *The Simpsons*, the subject of the final chapter, are popular topics of research in media studies. *Seinfeld, Master of Its Domain* presents a collection of essays ranging over much of the critical and academic discourse about the show, from its place within the history of genre and popular culture to its treatment of identity and sexuality.⁶⁷ Because the show itself has been so thematically wide-ranging, *The Simpsons* has sparked a large quantity of scholarly work on an ever-expanding array of themes. Paul A. Cantor’s essay, “*The Simpsons*: Atomistic Politics and the Nuclear Family,” epitomizes the

⁶⁴ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York, NY: BasicBooks, 1992).

⁶⁵ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997). Coontz’s other books are equally valuable on the history of family, marriage, and gender roles in America. See the bibliography for more works on marriage and family from Coontz and other authors.

⁶⁶ Several particularly relevant scholarly works not mentioned here will be used throughout the dissertation, and many other books and articles are listed in the bibliography, where they are organized by show.

⁶⁷ David Lavery and Sara Lewis Dunne, eds., *Seinfeld, Master of Its Domain: Revisiting Television's Greatest Sitcom* (New York: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2008).

academic as well as critical response to the show's outspoken opponents who, during the show's first few seasons, saw it as a negative depiction of both family and community.⁶⁸ There are many series overviews of *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons* which, though most are written for a popular audience, are often useful for their basic histories, interviews, and episode guides.⁶⁹ Both series also inspired a different range of books written for a wider audience but with an academic approach, such as philosophy, to discuss the content of a particular show.⁷⁰

The X-Files, one of the two shows examined in chapter four, has similarly sparked a large quantity of writing. A collection of scholarly essays about the series appeared after its third season, discussing the show's substantial fan culture and its depiction of gender and government.⁷¹ Because it was an early example of a fan community forming on the early internet, fan culture is the most popular theme for media studies examinations of the series.⁷² Most of the other books on the show are written for a popular audience, including a useful series of authorized guides to each season of *The X-Files*.⁷³

⁶⁸ Paul A. Cantor, "The Simpsons: Atomistic Politics and the Nuclear Family," *Political Theory* 27, No. 6 (Dec. 1999), 734-749.

⁶⁹ The best and most enjoyable example of a series guide is Matt Groening, Ray Richmond, and Antonia Coffman, *The Simpsons: A Complete Guide to Our Favorite Family* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1997). This edition covers the show's first eight seasons; since then, more books have been published to cover later seasons. An author of a *Seinfeld* fan newsletter wrote one of the many *Seinfeld* guides: Greg Gattuso, *The Seinfeld Universe: the Entire Domain* (Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Publishing, 1998).

⁷⁰ William Irwin has a series of books about philosophy and television, including *Seinfeld and Philosophy: A Book about Everything and Nothing* (Chicago: Open Court, 2000); and William Irwin, Mark T. Conard, and Aeon J. Skoble, *The Simpsons and Philosophy: the D'oh! of Homer* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001). Other similar books include: Tim Delaney, *Seinology: the Sociology of Seinfeld* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006).

⁷¹ David Lavery, Angela Hague, and Marla Cartwright, ed., *Deny All Knowledge: Reading The X Files* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

⁷² For example, Christine A. Wooley, "Visible Fandom: Reading *The X-Files* Through X-Philes," *Journal of Film and Video* 53, No. 4 (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 29-53.

⁷³ The first volume is Brian Lowry, Chris Carter, and Sarah Stegall, *The Truth is out There* (New York: HarperPrism, 1995).

Academic analysis of *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, the series discussed in chapter two, tends to follow the popular and journalistic discourse that surrounded the show when it began, namely its graphically violent and sexual content.⁷⁴ Scholars have examined *Law & Order* for its depiction of the American justice system, a depiction I attempt to historicize in chapter three.⁷⁵ Both of these crime shows are frequently discussed comparatively within larger discussions of their genres.⁷⁶ Series producers David Milch and Bill Clark co-wrote *True Blue*, which has some behind-the-scenes anecdotes about the series as well as many true stories that formed the basis for some of the show's plots.⁷⁷ There is no printed series guide for *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, though there is one for *Law & Order*.⁷⁸ The internet, of course, offers a range of series guides for all shows, ranging from the professional, like IMDb.com (Internet Movie Database), to the amateur.⁷⁹

Compared to these shows, scholars have neglected *Touched by an Angel*. The most serious examinations of the show can be found within works looking at the larger theme of religion in popular culture, though even these examples are often no more than passing references.⁸⁰ Most scholars consider the significance of *Touched by an Angel* within its popularly

⁷⁴ For example, Barbara K. Kaye and Lucia M. Fishburne, "NYPD Blue and Media Hype: An Analysis of Sex and Indecent Language," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 5, no. 1 (1997), 84-103.

⁷⁵ For example, Felice F. Guerrieri, "Law & Order: Redefining the Relationship between Prosecutors and Police," *Southern Illinois University Law Journal* 25 (2000), 353-375.

⁷⁶ One example that discusses both series is Jonathan Nichols-Pethick, *TV Cops: The Contemporary American Television Police Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁷⁷ David Milch and Bill Clark, *True Blue: The Real Stories behind NYPD Blue*, (New York: William Morrow and Co, 1995).

⁷⁸ Kevin Courrier and Susan Green, *Law & Order: the Unofficial Companion* (Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 2000).

⁷⁹ Some of the amateur sites dedicated to television shows are quite good. *The Simpsons* wiki is incredibly rich in its documentation of the show's richly developed world: <http://simpsons.wikia.com>. *The X-Files* wiki is almost as good: <http://x-files.wikia.com>. "*Seinfeld* Scripts" has much more beyond fairly accurate transcripts of each episode: <http://www.seinfeldscripts.com>.

⁸⁰ For example, there is a chapter discussing viewer reactions to *Touched by an Angel* in Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

understood identity as an outlier within a primetime schedule mostly devoid of explicitly religious content.⁸¹ That context is important for my consideration of the show in chapter four, but only in helping to understand what *Touched by an Angel* and *The X-Files* suggest about nature of belief in the nineties.

The State of Television in the Nineties

September 11, 2001 is a cairn in the story of American history. While the historical impact of the date is perhaps overstated, accentuated by the memory of those who watched the trauma unfold on television, it is nevertheless a crucial moment, politically and culturally.⁸² Around the same time, the television industry was undergoing drastic changes that had nothing to do with terrorism. The new millennium just happened to be the moment when the effect of several crucial technological developments coalesced, shifting the way Americans watched television. As a result (a happy one for anyone looking for a neat periodization for a history of television) the nineties were the last decade that the broadcast networks held their ratings dominance.⁸³

For decades, television viewers could count their TV options on one hand. Around 1980, cable channels geared toward a specialized audience started to proliferate. ESPN was founded in

⁸¹ Resembling a tendency I earlier pinned on traditional historical methodology, media studies scholarship has used *Touched by an Angel* as merely an example reflecting a thesis about religion's relationship to popular culture without a deeper analysis of the show. This series, as popular as it was, is one nineties show that deserves a closer look, even beyond my examination in this dissertation.

⁸² Admittedly, periodizing scripted television with respect to geopolitical events, even significant ones, is an artificial exercise. Even keeping in mind the lengthy production process that delays television series' reaction times to news, there is no clear cut difference between TV created before and after that 9th of November when the Berlin Wall fell. And even *24* (Fox, 2001-10 and 2014), the television series that dealt most directly with post-9/11 themes, was conceived and its first episodes were filmed before the attacks.

⁸³ Basic cable finally surpassed broadcast networks in year-long ratings in 2002, and network TV's share has continued to decline to the present. Elizabeth Jensen, "Cable Continues to cut into Networks' Audience," *The Record* (Bergin, NJ), January 11, 2004, E6.

1979, CNN in 1980, and MTV in 1981. The percentage of American homes with cable rose steadily from 20% in 1980, to 57% in 1989, to 68% in 1999.⁸⁴ It was a subscription-based premium cable channel (as opposed to cable channels like ESPN, CNN, and MTV that earned a large portion of their revenue from commercials) that first aired a series which regularly defeated most broadcast network competition. HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) regularly reached an audience size cable channels had never before approached. At its peak in 2002 it was averaging 18.2 million viewers per episode.⁸⁵ It was only one series, but those numbers were unprecedented for a non-broadcast network series. Other cable channels chased HBO's success, airing television series that were edgier and more artful than anything the traditional networks would or could broadcast.⁸⁶

At the same time, digital video recorders (DVRs) started to propagate, making it easy for viewers to record shows to watch whenever they choose. On the industry side, DVRs mean live event programming has become more valuable than ever to advertisers. The mass culture experience of appointment viewing, sitting down to watch sitcoms and dramas at the same moment as ten million Americans or more, has become much rarer. We will probably never see a network lineup like the one that dominated the ratings for an extended period like NBC's

⁸⁴ Christopher H. Sterling and John M. Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 871.

⁸⁵ *Game of Thrones* was the first HBO show to surpass that mark, averaging 18.4 million viewers in 2014. Network executives would kill to score that number now, but recall that *The Cosby Show* averaged more than 20 million viewers for NBC in the 1989-90 season. James Hibberd, "'Game of Thrones' whacks 'The Sopranos' to become HBO's most popular show ever," *Entertainment Weekly*, June 5, 2014, accessed September 12, 2014, <http://insidetv.ew.com/2014/06/05/game-of-thrones-sopranos-ratings/>.

⁸⁶ Because the bandwidth used to broadcast network television over the air is considered a public good, the broadcast networks are subject to FCC oversight and control. Cable channels, from Comedy Central to Cinemax, have as much freedom of speech as any American individual. It may appear that Comedy Central moderates its own content to avoid offending its audience, but they are primarily concerned with losing advertising dollars. It is companies buying ad space that are worried about offending their consumers. As for subscription cable, like Cinemax and HBO, these shows can and have gotten away with much more graphic images and language because they are not beholden to their advertisers. The ratings and warnings that appear before an HBO show are done voluntarily for the audience.

Thursday night “Must See TV” did in the eighties and nineties. In the 1995-96 season, Americans could watch the three most popular shows on television—*Friends*, *Seinfeld*, and *ER*—without changing the channel.⁸⁷

In 1975, Raymond Williams described the television viewing experience as “flow.”⁸⁸ Viewers could do nothing more than change the channel as the stream of television images, programming and commercials, fed ceaselessly out of the tube. By the end of the nineties, the audience was gaining increasing control of this flow. Beginning in the eighties with the emergence of cable and VCRs, a variety of new technologies have undermined broadcasting’s seemingly inherent quality of simultaneity, making the television experience itself less communal.⁸⁹

Themes: Community and Family

By community, I mean a group of connected relationships with a particular level of familiarity, within a particular sphere of everyday life, and with a particular set of assumptions and expectations about how their relationships are meant to operate. Ferdinand Tönnies’s terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* help elaborate this definition. *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* are typically translated “community” and “society,” but that translation is misleading, both because community and society are nearly synonyms as they are commonly used and because the translation leaves out the factors motivating human connections in which Tönnies was most interested. Interpersonal emotions and expectations of role motivate *Gemeinschaft* relationships.

⁸⁷ Brooks and Marsh, 1692.

⁸⁸ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975).

⁸⁹ For an excellent history of the many crucial changes to the medium and its industry, see Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

Gemeinschaft encompasses the loving interactions one has with family, friends, and other familiars as well as the traditional expectations of one's behavior and role within such relationships. By contrast, individualism and capitalism motivate *Gesellschaft* interactions, creating relatively superficial ties out of either mutual self-interest or exploitation.⁹⁰ As discussed at several points in this dissertation, American television frequently depicts *Gemeinschaft* relationships forming out of *Gesellschaft* bonds—co-workers forming family-like units of community.⁹¹

Community is a useful theme for examining scripted television shows because they are particularly, and perhaps inherently, communal.⁹² Television shows depict a group of characters bunched together for some specific reason, usually within a specific setting, interacting with each other for an open-ended period of time, as long as the network keeps the series on the schedule. Each episode is a weekly opportunity for the audience to check in on a certain community of characters to see how they are dealing with their latest problems. The community—the collection of main characters living in a particular setting—is the one constant in episodic television.

“Community” is theme number one in this dissertation, but “family” is theme “1A.” As divorce rates climbed, gender roles changed, and traditional ideas of what a family “looked like” evolved in the late 20th century, television moved away from the nuclear family as the central

⁹⁰ Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society*, trans. Charles Loomis (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1957).

⁹¹ Television thus reveals the common pitfall of considering *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as separate and distinct concepts.

⁹² By “scripted television shows,” I mean television programs conceived in advance by writers and performed by actors playing characters in front of cameras. This differentiates scripted TV from other genre categories, including television news, talk shows, game shows, sports, and reality programming. The latter genre is indeed quite scripted, but as reality shows ostensibly depict real people reacting to real situations, they remain a distinct category.

relationship in characters' lives.⁹³ In its place, television depicted groups of characters forming family-like units in a variety of settings. In the nineties, *Seinfeld* was one of several shows that presented a community of friends-as-family, while *N.Y.P.D. Blue* offered a version of the common television theme of workplace-as-family. Solitary, isolated characters seem more ubiquitous in film, literature, and comic books. Television alone among storytelling media cannot seem to break free of placing characters in some sort of family-like community.⁹⁴

All of the shows examined in this dissertation engage with changing conceptions of family in America. Meanwhile, in a not unrelated development, other traditional community bonds were getting weaker. As we will see though, many of these shows, particularly the dramas, trace the root of their inciting drama to brokenness in individuals and families rather than brokenness in the wider community. Television shows reacted to the reality in which they were conceived. But to consider television as merely a mirror, reflecting its context, dismisses the medium's power to contribute ideas to its American audience. As tens of millions of Americans watched, some of the most popular shows on television in the nineties depicted a variety of forms of healthy American communities. Others envisioned new ways to heal America's fractures.

Conclusion

This dissertation explores the social values emphasized in nineties television. It examines the formations of personal, local, and national communities portrayed on the most popular

⁹³ Stephanie Coontz, without disputing the demographic shifts over the last half of the 20th century, points out the vision of the family unit captured in the family sitcoms of the fifties and sixties was itself a fleeting conception of family, not the last moment of a long American tradition of rigid nuclear family structure. See Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*.

⁹⁴ Even the recent *Last Man on Earth* (Fox, 2014-present) could not get through one episode without introducing a second character and undermining its basic premise.

shows. Primetime television presented ways to negotiate America's late 20th century cultural unmooring in the final decade of network television's ratings dominance. While the dissertation largely supports the historiographic picture of an increasingly fragmented United States, it also suggests that popular culture presented a variety responses to this fragmentation.

My approach considers television as not simply mirror for the cultural context within which it is created, but a powerful source of ideas influencing that culture. That said, I must reiterate a crucial disclaimer in the matter of reception. As pervasive as these hit television shows were throughout American culture, it is nearly impossible to gauge how they were received. As media theorists like Stuart Hall have shown, reception is infinitely varied among audience members.⁹⁵ While this dissertation describes the ideological meanings these shows presented, it does not attempt to claim with any certainty how these meanings were received.⁹⁶

The difficulty of the reception question does not change the fact that these popular shows were transmitting ideas to millions of Americans every week for years. By choosing the most popular shows, this dissertation seeks to explore the complexity of the ideas television presented to millions of viewers. And by examining each series in its entirety, this dissertation reveals each show's ideological slant, presented throughout its run to large portions of the nation.

In many ways, I believe television is at least as powerful a source of ideas as politicians, intellectuals, and other publically influential figures. The TV set is a loud player in what Dror Wahrman, working in a different historical context and with a different breed of sources, calls the "cultural soundbox." As Wahrman writes, "In contrast with the intellectual historian for

⁹⁵ Stuart Hall, *Encoding and decoding in the television discourse* (Birmingham, England: Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1973).

⁹⁶ The few exceptions are cases where a particular audience reception was evident and particularly relevant to the show's ideological importance, such as fan mail responses to *Touched by an Angel's* message of therapeutic faith.

whom individual enunciations that are especially articulate and explicit are the most valuable, in what follows a single enunciation or act does not and cannot by itself carry much weight.”⁹⁷

These television series enunciated their visions of community weekly, infiltrating and shaping American culture through the imaginings their audience enjoyed.

From 1980 through the nineties, 98% of American households owned a television.⁹⁸ By comparison, as of 2014, 90% of American adults owned a cell phone, and 64% had a smart phone.⁹⁹ In the same year, 84% of U.S. households owned a computer, and 73% had a computer with a broadband internet connection.¹⁰⁰ Meanwhile, the television remains in the vast majority of American homes, but ownership has begun to decline. In 2011, the number of households owning a television set fell for only the second time since World War II; 96.7% of households owned a set, the lowest percentage since the mid-1970s.¹⁰¹ In the nineties, while high speed internet began to emerge, television remained the dominant communications technology in America.

At the same time the medium itself defied the fragmentation that had beset late 20th century American culture. The most popular network shows, viewed live across the country, offered a simultaneous experience of mass culture on a national scale. A higher number of

⁹⁷ Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2004), xv-xvi. Thanks to Michael Fisher for passing, via Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, this articulation of an approach to cultural history along to me.

⁹⁸ Sterling and Kittross, 864-65.

⁹⁹ “Cell Phone and Smartphone Ownership Demographics,” Pew Research Center, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.pewinternet.org/data-trend/mobile/cell-phone-and-smartphone-ownership-demographics/>.

¹⁰⁰ Lee Raine and D’Vera Cohn, “Census: Computer Ownership, Internet connection Varies Widely across U.S.,” *Pew Research Center*, September 19, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/19/census-computer-ownership-internet-connection-varies-widely-across-u-s/>

¹⁰¹ Brian Stelter, “Ownership of TV Sets Falls in the U.S.,” *New York Times*, May 3, 2011. The only other year to record a decline in household television ownership was 1992 when America was in the midst of a recession. At the same time, the number of households also fell, so the percentage of households owning a television still went up that year. Sterling and Kittross, 864.

channels and new, affordable technology would exacerbate television's fragmentation into the next century.

The following describes the collage of the most popular shows seen on broadcast network television in its last decade of ratings dominance. Millions of Americans gazed at this collage, focusing on the parts of the collage that caught their eye, and negotiating their own individual interpretations of those parts. The collage cast visions of community in a variety of forms on Americans' television sets, repeating each show's distinct ideology each week. Created in and engaging with a context of cultural fragmentation and uncertainty, the collage imagined different ways to survive, or embrace, or cope, or even change American life. This dissertation identifies these visions of community in this collage, explaining their historical context within American culture.

In sitcoms, as in reality, many old social anchors were cast aside; *Seinfeld* and *Friends* depicted family, workplace, tradition, and other older social structures as unreliable. *The Simpsons* was about a family, one that overcame its own dysfunction despite every challenge. A cartoon fantasy and a scathing satire, *The Simpsons* nevertheless offered a hopeful depiction of a community that survived and even thrived despite its many flaws.

Meanwhile, television dramas featured characters who were battered but not beaten (like *N.Y.P.D. Blue*'s Detective Sipowicz) working in flawed yet stalwart institutions (like the justice system in *Law & Order*) built to process the endless stream of brokenness that was the inevitable product of dense urban communities. Other more fantastical dramas dared to ask whether there was still some higher power at work in a world of uncertainty. *The X-Files* preached that, through an alliance of faith and science, the truth out there could be discovered. And *Touched by an Angel* comforted viewers with the vision that God's helping angels were ever-present.

To the lonely television viewer, the collage offered comfort and maybe a little inspiration. Within his shaky postmodern existence, the viewer may have even spotted a glimmer of hope, a vision of the sort of family, faith, or love that could help him experience a more fulfilling social experience within an increasingly fragmented world.

Chapter 1

Seinfeld and the Failure of the Coffee Shop as a Third Place

We could go to one of those cappuccino places. They let you just sit there.
—Jerry¹

Starbucks landed on Manhattan on April 22, 1994.² Located at Broadway and West 87th Street, the Seattle-based chain's new coffee shop was right in the neighborhood where Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer had their weekly adventures in *Seinfeld*, the best-rated sitcom of the 1990s.³ That same spring, *Seinfeld*'s fifth, the show finished the network television season in third place among primetime shows in the Nielsen ratings, a jump from 25th the previous season. It would never drop lower than second in its final four seasons. Syndicated episodes of *Seinfeld* still remain on the air through the present. Starbucks remains in New York City.

Coffee is the central beverage in *Seinfeld*, the social lubricant close at hand when the four characters gather in their favorite diner, Monk's. Though there is no sign of any espresso machines at Monk's, Jerry and his friends could be seen drinking gourmet coffee in various episodes.⁴ A little over a year after the new Starbucks store opened, Kramer sued the fictional Java World for the burns he sustained from spilling a hot caffè latte on himself.⁵ In the mid-90s,

¹ "Male Unbonding," *Seinfeld*, season one, episode four (NBC, June 14, 1990).

² Gisela Moriarty, "Coffee Retailer Ready to Roast N.Y.—Upper West Side Gets Shop Tomorrow," *Seattle Times*, April 21, 1994, D1.

³ Jerry's address on the series is 129 West 81st Street, an address where the real Jerry Seinfeld once lived.

⁴ In this chapter and throughout the dissertation I will refer to the real Jerry Seinfeld as "Seinfeld" and the character he played as "Jerry."

⁵ "The Maestro," *Seinfeld*, season seven, episode three (NBC, October 5, 1995). Kramer's case was a reference to a famous case of a woman who won a lawsuit against McDonald's after she spilled hot coffee on herself. See Andrea Gerlin, "A Matter of Degree: How a Jury Decided that a Coffee Spill is Worth \$2.9 Million," *Wall Street Journal*, September 1, 1994. Kramer settles his case a bit hastily after a balm heals his burn scars before he can show them to Java World's lawyers. He goes home with unlimited

the caffè latte was still a novelty for most Americans. Howard Schultz, the executive who presided over Starbucks' 1990s expansion, boasted that no one in America had even heard of a caffè latte when he first tried the drink in Milan in 1983.⁶ That was an exaggeration, but not a massive one; the tiny network of gourmet coffee aficionados Schultz was then involved with were focusing their attention on brewed coffee, not lattes and other espresso-based drinks. As Mark Pendergrast puts it in his history of coffee, "Schultz brought Italian espresso to North America, where he improved the quality of the beans...then drowned the result in milk for lattes and cappuccinos."⁷

Straight espresso is still on Starbucks' menu; it was its American customers who fell in love with the milkier, more diluted concoctions. Customer preference also drove Schultz to make American Starbucks cozier than their Italian counterparts, adding seats for customers who wanted to linger while they sipped their large espresso drinks.⁸

Linger is what Jerry and his friends had been doing in their coffee shop since *Seinfeld's* pilot episode aired on NBC in 1989 until the show's final episode in 1998.⁹ In light of the characters' habits of discussing the minutiae of their lives as social creatures, *Seinfeld* became known as the "show about nothing," and its characters, several critics noted, seemed to epitomize a trend in American character described in Christopher Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism*.¹⁰ *New*

caffè lattes but no money. Throughout the episode, Kramer exaggerates his pronunciation of "caffè latte," thus suggesting that, as of 1995, the phrase was still somewhat exotic in America.

⁶ Howard Schultz and Dori Jones Yang, *Pour Your Heart Into It: How Starbucks Built a Company One Cup at a Time*, (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 53.

⁷ Mark Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 420.

⁸ Pendergrast, 369.

⁹ "Good News, Bad News" a.k.a. "The Seinfeld Chronicles," *Seinfeld*, season one, episode one/pilot (NBC, July 5, 1989).

¹⁰ The day of the series finale, Scott McLemee summed up *Seinfeld's* nothing-ness and its narcissism. "'Seinfeld': Much Ado about Nothing," *Seattle Times*, May 14, 1998.

York Times columnist Maureen Dowd quoted a description of the series as “the worst, last gasp of Reaganite, grasping, materialistic, narcissistic, banal self-absorption.”¹¹ *Seinfeld* thus led American popular culture in the nineties in mocking the quiet yet inescapable desperation of its characters in a post-Cold War America that offered few obvious reasons for them to be so miserable.¹²

Culturally and ideologically, *Seinfeld* was influenced by the larger undertones of its moment in American post-Cold War culture. On November 9, 1989, East Germany opened the Berlin Wall. In August 1991 a failed coup sparked the dissolution of the Soviet Union. *Seinfeld*'s four-episode first season run debuted in between those landmark events. The decisive closure of the century's great ideological conflict seemed to epitomize Jean-François Lyotard's description of postmodernism as the end of metanarratives and fulfill Daniel Bell's prediction of the end of ideology.¹³ Against this deeper cultural backdrop, *Seinfeld*'s characters went through their lives with a profound and conscious detachment from any ideologies, codes, or norms. At its basic level, the show's comedic sensibility sought to point out and mock unspoken norms of social behavior in America. The more the characters interacted in society, the more they loathed both their surrounding community, each other, and even themselves. Indeed, references to *Culture of*

¹¹ Maureen Dowd, “Yada Yada Yuppies,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1997. Dowd is quoting *The New Republic*'s editor Leon Wieseltier. This quote continues to pop up in both print and online writing about *Seinfeld*, but I cannot find where it originally appeared, if it did appear in writing.

¹² With more laughs and better ratings, *Seinfeld* dealt with themes reminiscent of the self-indulgent agonizing of upper middle class characters in *thirtysomething* (ABC, 1987-1991). Certainly, there is a bridge between the sensibilities of those two shows, but *Seinfeld*'s humor, drenched in irony and sarcasm, came at the expense of its own characters, while *thirtysomething*'s dramatic tension over similar hopes and fears was mostly unironic.

¹³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1979, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology; On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960).

Narcissism and critics of *Seinfeld* often fail to stress that narcissism, as Lasch understood it, manifests itself more deeply as self-loathing than self-love.

Seinfeld mocked the typical values both characters in sitcoms and people in reality held for being good: family loyalty, civic duty, community pride, and religious belief. These values were intrinsically, if not explicitly, linked to American identity throughout the Cold War. And they were inherently part of the behavior of sitcom characters throughout the same period. *Seinfeld* tossed them all aside, a fundamentally postmodern act.

Not only did *Seinfeld* align with the lack of ideology inherent to postmodernism as an intellectual age, it also exhibited characteristics particular to postmodern art. It was frequently and increasingly self-referential and heavily ironic. *Seinfeld* often drew attention to its own artifice, particularly throughout its fourth season (1992-93) when the titular character attempted to create a sitcom about his own life for NBC. This self-consciousness, increasingly a feature of American television since the 1980s, emphasized that the show was aware of its own artifice even as it deconstructed real life social behavior.

Seinfeld's characters were an anti-social, anti-community quartet. While their favorite place to spend time was the public space of a coffee shop, they nevertheless failed to embrace and indeed actively resisted the communal nature of that space. Sadly, their behavior resembles the detached experience inherent to most American coffee shops even as coffee culture exploded from the nineties on. Before further exploring the cultural link between *Seinfeld* and Starbucks, let us turn to *Seinfeld's* significance within the history of television sitcoms.

***Seinfeld* and Influences**

It is easy to emphasize (and marvel at) the ways *Seinfeld* differs from sitcoms past. *Seinfeld*, with self-referential jokes like the season four show-within-a-show, exhibits a more

postmodern aesthetic than any predecessor or contemporary except *The Simpsons*. The pace of the jokes on the show is also noticeably faster than eighties sitcoms. Also, before the nineties, most sitcoms tended to follow a bifurcated plot structure in each episode, with the majority of the show's airtime spent following the particular characters involved in a central storyline (the A-story) while other characters grappled with a separate, unrelated issue in short asides throughout the half-hour (the B-story). By the end of its run, *Seinfeld* was including C- and even D-stories, one for each main character. Usually, most or even all of these stories somehow collided in the episode's climax.¹⁴

The premise of *Seinfeld* was initially and simply how a standup comedian gets his material. It starred Jerry Seinfeld, a comic in real life, playing a comedian named Jerry Seinfeld. Episodes were interspersed with segments of Jerry doing bits of his act. The show's obsession with the minutiae of daily life makes sense within this context. But this unique sitcom structure was gradually excised as it became unnecessary. The show's co-creators Seinfeld and Larry David shared both a sensitivity to the world's banalities and an ability to make such observations

¹⁴ "The Chinese Restaurant" is the most critically celebrated episode of season two, but "The Busboy" was equally significant for the aesthetic evolution of the series. That was the episode when Larry David, credited for the script along with Seinfeld, "discovered" the pleasure of multiple unrelated storylines connecting. "The Busboy," *Seinfeld*, season two, episode 12 (NBC, June 26, 1991). NBC dumped the episode late in June, more than a month after the previous new episode because executives did not like that Jerry's character was not predominately featured in the story—another step forward in the show's evolution. Incidentally, the previous episode was "The Chinese Restaurant," the real-time, "bottle" episode that some NBC executives also balked at but for which David and other allies within network management fought. To its credit, NBC stuck with the still poorly-rated show, renewing it for a third season just as the show's creators were beginning to appreciate what they had in *Seinfeld*'s supporting cast, and just as David was traveling up the learning curve to become a brilliant television writer. In the DVD's "Inside Look" featurette on "The Busboy," David explains the significance of the episode in his own development as a sitcom show runner: "One of the turning points in the writing for me came with the busboy episode when somehow the busboy character met Elaine's boyfriend in the hallway... And that left an impression on me, how those two stories really collided like- like freight trains. And I remember thinking how I really liked how that happened." Such colliding storylines became a signature of *Seinfeld*'s style, as well as a fundamental aspect of David's later work in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

both funny and relatable; eventually *Seinfeld* did not need to frame its content with Seinfeld's stand-up material to give each episode a reason for being on television.

Both the substance and the style of the show were different from those of sitcoms that came before. Still, compared to comedies that would reach television after the turn of the century, *Seinfeld* was far from revolutionary. It was a multicamera sitcom, shot almost entirely within a studio with multiple cameras capturing wide-angle and close-up shots of the action. It also had a laugh track courtesy of the studio audience that attended the tapings. It was thirty minutes long, including regularly-spaced commercial breaks. It was shot on film. It appeared on network television. Its characters never addressed the camera directly. In the coming years many of these elements could no longer be taken for granted as essential to the television sitcom's form.

Sitcom History

Early television comedy had an inextricable influence on *Seinfeld*, and Jerry Seinfeld has expressed his admiration of comedy teams like Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, and George Burns and Gracie Allen. The latter pair translated their act to television with particular success on *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (CBS, 1950-1958). That show has perhaps the most direct influence on *Seinfeld* of any show from the first decade of television's dominance; vaguely anticipating the stand-up segments on *Seinfeld*, Burns frames many episode by watching excerpts of the show, commenting on Allen's behavior to the audience. On *Seinfeld*, the dynamic between Jerry and George often resembles the hapless antics

of Laurel and Hardy; in one episode, the pair explicitly references their comedic ancestors, bidding each other, “Good night Ollie!” and “Good night Stan!”¹⁵

In the 1950s variety shows (like *Burns and Allen*) and westerns dominated the schedule and the ratings. Most of the original TV sitcoms emerged from sketches on variety shows (such as *The Honeymooners*) or were originally radio comedies (such as *Amos ‘n’ Andy*).¹⁶ *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-57) was the first hit standalone sitcom to emerge on television. Along the way, it established many of the conventions for sitcoms, including the use of three cameras simultaneously filming the action on the set with a live studio audience in lieu of providing laughter via a pre-recorded laugh track added after filming.¹⁷

Like *Seinfeld*, *I Love Lucy* is about four adult characters rather than a single family. Though both shows were shot in Hollywood, both are two of the most famous sitcoms set in New York City. The similarities quickly end there, and the contrasts are telling. Like *Burns and Allen* in real life, *I Love Lucy*’s characters are married couples; *Seinfeld*’s characters are single, occasionally yearning for marriage, but more often poking fun at the institution. *I Love Lucy* follows Lucy’s pursuit of her husband’s show business success. *Seinfeld* was originally created to focus on the relationship between Jerry’s show business persona and his everyday life, but Jerry’s occupation is rarely significant for the show’s plots.

¹⁵ “The Chaperone,” *Seinfeld*, season six, episode one (NBC, September 22, 1994).

¹⁶ First appearing in 1951, *The Honeymooners* was originally a sketch on *Cavalcade of Stars* (DuMont, 1949-1952) and then on *The Jackie Gleason Show* (CBS, 1952-57) before becoming a half-hour show on CBS from 1955-56. *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was a radio show from 1928-50 with, notoriously, two white comedians, Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden, voicing the two black characters. The television show starred black actors as the title characters, and ran on CBS from 1951-53.

¹⁷ The first television show to use a pre-recorded laugh track was *The Hank McCune Show*, which debuted as a local Los Angeles show in 1949. It was picked up nationally by NBC in 1950, where it ran from September to December before it was cancelled.

Sitcoms depicting nuclear families living in single-family, suburban homes, increasingly a norm for the growing white middle class, began to proliferate around the time *I Love Lucy* concluded.¹⁸ Examples include *Father Knows Best* (adapted from radio to CBS, 1954-55, '58-60, and NBC, 1955-58), *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS, 1957-58; ABC, 1958-63), and *The Donna Reed Show* (ABC, 1958-66). These shows emphasized the nuclear family as the foundation of American social life and the ultimate solution to the problems an individual encountered in the world. The unmarried characters on *Seinfeld*, on the other hand, find their parents to be a common source of problems. They are happier when their parents live far away, and they can fulfill their filial duties with an occasional phone call and less occasional visit.

Seinfeld's starkest contrast within the family tree of television sitcoms is found in the rural comedies that flourished in the 1960s. The most popular iteration of these is also perhaps the most ideologically opposite to *Seinfeld's* ethos. *The Andy Griffith Show* (CBS, 1960-68), along with *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962-71) and *Green Acres* (CBS, 1965-71), preached simple small town living as an antidote to the urban hustle that was drawing America away from its traditional values and was to blame for the very stresses *Seinfeld's* urban characters found inescapable. A 1963 episode of *The Andy Griffith Show* is particularly representative of the rural comedy philosophy found on television in this period. In "Man in a Hurry," a businessman's car breaks down outside of Mayberry, the small town where the show takes place.¹⁹ He is rushing to a meeting in the city the next day. The people of Mayberry, led by Sheriff Andy Taylor (Andy Griffith's character) are happy to help him get on his way, just not at the quick pace he demands.

¹⁸ Lucy moved into a single-family house in a subsequent sitcom, *The Lucy Show* (CBS, 1962-68). In this case, Lucille Ball played a widowed mother of two who lived with her divorced friend and mother of one, played by Vivian Vance, Ball's former co-star in *I Love Lucy*. This sort of reconstituted version of a nuclear family, discussed further in chapter five, is increasingly common in American sitcoms from the 1960s.

¹⁹ "Man in a Hurry," *The Andy Griffith Show*, season three, episode 16 (CBS, January 14, 1963).

They take things particularly slow as it is Sunday. Eventually, the Mayberry mindset wins him over; he realizes he has been putting too much priority on the demands of his job at the cost of appreciating life's simpler pleasures. Were he to meet the characters of *Seinfeld*, Sheriff Andy might prescribe a long stay in Mayberry.

Unfortunately, the *Seinfeld* characters' vacations are rarely restful. In the first season episode, "The Stock Tip," Jerry's weekend in Vermont with his new girlfriend goes terribly for no other reason than rain and boredom.²⁰ In "The Bubble Boy," Kramer accidentally burns down a rustic cabin and George gets into a fight with a sick teenager who lives in a bubble in upstate New York.²¹ In the series finale, the characters cannot spend one minute in a small town without mocking the locals and failing to come to the aid of a carjacking victim. Their brief visit to small town America eventually leads them to prison.²² There may be a Mayberry somewhere in the *Seinfeld* universe, though their experiences in the country make such a place's existence seem doubtful. Anyway, they are too broken to find personal healing from a quick trip to the country.

The rural sitcoms of the 1960s were essentially family sitcoms. So too were Norman Lear's sitcoms in the 1970s, including *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-79) and *Sanford and Son* (NBC, 1972-77). Meanwhile, starting with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-77), producer Grant Tinker's and actress Mary Tyler Moore's MTM Enterprises began creating sitcoms about the family-like bonds that formed among co-workers. Moore's character, Mary Richards articulates this familial community to her coworkers in the series finale:

Sometimes I get concerned about being a career woman. I get to thinking that my job is too important to me. And I tell myself that the people I work with are just the people I work with. But last night I thought, what is family anyway? It's the people

²⁰ "The Stock Tip," *Seinfeld*, season one, episode five (NBC, June 21, 1990).

²¹ "The Bubble Boy," *Seinfeld*, season four, episode seven (NBC, October 7, 1992).

²² "The Finale," *Seinfeld*, season nine, episode 22 (NBC, May 14, 1998).

who make you feel less alone and really loved. And that's what you've done for me. Thank you for being my family.²³

Mary, single and unmarried, receives family-like structure, support, and emotional benefits from her co-workers at her television news station in Minneapolis. Expanding a premise first explored in the military sitcoms of the fifties and sixties,²⁴ workplace sitcoms proliferated after *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and the subgenre remained popular well into the 21st century.²⁵ Thus, television sitcoms were de-emphasizing the importance of the nuclear and even the extended family two decades before *Seinfeld*.

In the nineties, as the next chapter will discuss, the workplace-as-family dynamic was a central theme in television dramas like *N.Y.P.D. Blue* and *ER*. *Seinfeld's* characters, though, find no such surrogate families in their workplaces. Jerry, a comedian, has no office, and he often lords this fact over his friends when they complain about their relationships at work.²⁶ George's and Elaine's bosses exhibit an endless variety of quirks that make them difficult to work for. Their coworkers, like most acquaintances on the show, are merely yet another source of awkward, unwanted human interaction that must be navigated to get through the day.

Cheers (NBC, 1982-93), paired with *Seinfeld* in its final year on NBC's schedule, is *Seinfeld's* most similar predecessor. Some of the characters in *Cheers* are co-workers at the titular bar; others are customers. None of them are related, and yet they do bond and go through

²³ "The Last Show," *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season seven, episode 24 (CBS, March 19, 1977). For more on MTM Enterprises and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show's* co-creator, James L. Brooks, see chapter five of David Marc and Robert J. Thompson, *Prime Time, Prime Movers: From I Love Lucy to L.A. Law--America's Greatest TV Shows and the People Who Created Them* (Boston: Little Brown, 1992).

²⁴ Examples include *The Phil Silvers Show* (CBS, 1955-59; also known as *Sgt. Bilko* and *You'll Never Get Rich*), *McHale's Navy* (ABC, 1962-66), and *F Troop* (ABC, 1965-67).

²⁵ Besides most of the MTM Enterprise sitcoms, other notable examples include *Taxi* (ABC, 1978-1982), *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998), and *The Office* (NBC, 2005-2013).

²⁶ In "The Stranded," *Seinfeld*, season three, episode 10 (NBC, November 27, 1991), George, finding it uncomfortable to date a woman he works with, asks Jerry, "Have you ever dated a woman that worked in your office?" Jerry smugly replies, "I've never had a job."

life together in a family-like manner. Most importantly for this discussion, their intimate community is centered in the public space of the bar, away from both home and work, just as *Seinfeld*'s community of four friends is often found gathering in a coffee shop. *Cheers* is a crucial comparison for *Seinfeld* and we will return later to the differences in the communal behavior depicted on the two shows.

The Ideology of the “Show about Nothing”

Seinfeld became known as a “show about nothing,” in which there was “no hugging and no learning.”²⁷ It is a pithy way for television critics to discuss a show that suggests in nightmarish detail an existential crisis of life in postmodern, late 20th century America. *Seinfeld*'s petty, neurotic characters seemed solely focused on eating, sleeping, having sex, and passing the time in between those behaviors because, unmoored from society, they can think of nothing to live for beyond their selves. Instead, the characters are caught in an endless loop of meaningless dialogue, like Jerry and George's conversation about buttons on shirts, the opening dialogue of the first episode of the series.²⁸

George most of all seems to be drifting from day to day, as Kramer tries to point out to him:

KRAMER: Do you ever yearn?

GEORGE: Yearn? Do I yearn?

²⁷ Both of these descriptions have been written about in so many places, it is difficult to track down their origins. The rule about no hugging and no learning has usually been attributed as instructions given to the writers' room by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld, usually the former. The series referenced both descriptions at different times. In “The Pitch,” *Seinfeld*, season four, episode three (NBC, September 16, 1992), George and Jerry come up with an idea for “a show about nothing” to pitch to NBC. In “The Finale,” Jerry and George almost hug each other, stopping themselves at the last moment. *Seinfeld*'s nihilism is discussed at length in Thomas S. Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from the Exorcist to Seinfeld* (2nd ed., Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012). In my opinion, Hibbs's use of “nihilism,” observing it throughout late twentieth century culture, is too broad, though his analysis of individual items in popular culture is often provocative. I hope this chapter offers a more complex, precise understanding of the characters' perceived relationships to society.

²⁸ “Good News, Bad News.”

KRAMER: I yearn.
GEORGE: You yearn.
KRAMER: Oh, yes. Yes, I yearn. Often, I-I sit, and yearn. Have you yearned?
GEORGE: Well, not recently. I crave. I crave all the time, constant craving, but I haven't yearned.
KRAMER: Look at you.
GEORGE: Aw, Kramer, don't start...
KRAMER: You're wasting your life.
GEORGE: I am not! What you call wasting, I call living! I'm living my life!
KRAMER: Okay, like what? No, tell me! Do you have a job?
GEORGE: No.
KRAMER: You got money?
GEORGE: No.
KRAMER: Do you have a woman?
GEORGE: No.
KRAMER: Do you have any prospects?
GEORGE: No.
KRAMER: You got anything on the horizon?
GEORGE: Uh...no.
KRAMER: Do you have any action at all?
GEORGE: No.
KRAMER: Do you have any conceivable reason for even getting up in the morning?
GEORGE: I like to get the Daily News!²⁹

George's character is based on the show's co-creator, Larry David, who is, at least as much as the co-creator and star, Jerry Seinfeld, the source of the show's ideology.³⁰ George is perpetually caught up agonizing over his own neuroses, paralyzed by his concerns with how he appears to those around him. He can never break free of this mental state, and thus he is doomed to spin his wheels for eternity. If, as Kramer points out, he could just find some external reason to move forward, he might escape. But he can see no reason at all.

Because they are not learning or growing, none of the characters on the show can move forward. Then again, this is a basic convention of traditional sitcoms; each week, their characters

²⁹ "The Keys," *Seinfeld*, season three, episode 23 (NBC, May 6, 1992).

³⁰ David became a star when he stepped in front of the camera for his acclaimed sitcom, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000-2011). Subsequently, retrospective analysis has given him credit as the prime source of the show, ahead of the seemingly more soft-edged Seinfeld. While I do think David is a comic genius, I believe it is best to think of them as equal partners in the show's development and execution. The fact that they remain good friends and occasional creative collaborators underscores their close working relationship and similarity of worldview.

overcome a challenge, seemingly finding themselves in a better, happier place, only to end up right back where they started in the next episode. *Seinfeld* differs from past sitcoms because its characters, almost as though they are conscious of this hopeless loop, embed this impossibility of individual progress into their ethical system of social behavior. So, unlike the traditional formula of the genre, there is no emotional uplift at the end of a typical episode of *Seinfeld*.

Seinfeld exposes that traditional formula as a lie. In the long run, all of those lessons learned at the conclusion of the traditional sitcom episode serve for nothing; the characters still have the same flaws they had the week before. The characters never really grow, and their circumstances certainly never change. The entire series even began and ended with the same dialogue—Jerry and George discussing the placement of a button on George’s shirt—thus demonstrating that people cannot change. That is not a very optimistic belief. As we will see in the next chapter, *N.Y.P.D. Blue* is a series that does believe in the possibility of substantial individual transformation. But the impossibility of change is one of the fundamental pillars of *Seinfeld*’s ideology.³¹ And there are other pillars, revealing the lonely isolation within which the four characters live their lives.

Three Pillars

Narcissism is Inherent to Human Nature

Seinfeld’s characters wallow in their own narcissism. They are self-absorbed, obsessed with controlling the image they convey to the world, and frantic when they feel that image has been misunderstood. Elaine is upset when her boyfriend says he thinks she is going to hell, not

³¹ The question of whether and to what extent people can change their characters became an important theme for the third golden age of television that emerged at the turn of the century. Examples of dramas that explored this question include *Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015), and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013).

because she believes in hell—she does not—but because his critique of her character annoys her.³² George is similarly concerned when a childhood friend thinks he is going insane.³³ It is not the fact that she might be right that bothers him, but rather the fact that she observes such flaws in him that makes him obsessed with proving her wrong.

While George constantly frets about the way the world sees him, Jerry, his ego consistently swollen, seems to suffer from no such insecurities. Still, he might be the most narcissistic of the four. Out of the dozens of women he dates during the series, one stirs his feelings enough to provoke him to ask her to marry him. This is Jeannie Steinman (played by comedian Janeane Garofalo), and Jerry discovers the two have much more in common than a similar name. “She’s just like me,” he tells Kramer, excitedly. “She talks like me, she acts like me. She even ordered cereal at a restaurant. We even have the same initials. Wait a minute, I just realized what’s going on. ... Now I know what I’ve been looking for all these years. Myself! I’ve been waiting for me to come along and now I’ve swept myself off my feet!” But Jerry’s feelings quickly start to turn, until he starts to feel he has made a huge mistake. Confiding again in Kramer, he admits, “All of a sudden it hit me. I realized what the problem is. I can’t be with someone like me. I hate myself!”³⁴ This might be a powerful moment for Jerry, as his self-loathing is usually concealed safely behind a veneer of smug sarcasm. Instead, it is merely an impetus to break off the engagement, and the larger problem of self-loathing is never addressed.

Jerry is not the only character who finds a fine line between love and hate. George becomes obsessed with a woman who despises him, suggesting he is attracted to her because she sees him for the wretched soul he is. “She just dislikes me so much, it’s irresistible,” George

³² “The Burning,” *Seinfeld*, season nine, episode 16 (NBC, March 19, 1998).

³³ “The Gum,” *Seinfeld*, season seven, episode 10 (NBC, December 14, 1995).

³⁴ “The Invitations,” *Seinfeld*, season seven, episode 21 (NBC, May 16, 1996).

explains.³⁵ Elaine also finds herself obsessed with a man who cannot remember her name and stands her up for a date.³⁶ Her attraction is based on his apparent immunity to what she imagines is an impressive façade of charm and good looks. She cannot fathom that she would be forgettable to a heterosexual man.

Often the show seems as self-obsessed as the people it depicts. The constant self-referentiality, particularly during the “show-within-a-show” season four, reveals an inward-gaze as severe as the characters’. When his friend thinks he is insane, George tries to prove his sanity by essentially recapping the plot of the episode.³⁷ This is perhaps a wink from the writers to any audience member who has ever tried to explain an episode’s complicated plot to a person who had never seen the show.

Jerry, George, Elaine, and even the relatively less narcissistic Kramer all sense, at least vaguely, that their own deep-rooted flaws are more often the cause of their problems than fate, luck, misunderstanding, or the other usual sources of complications in traditional sitcoms. Throughout sitcom history, even the most flawed characters seemed to be essentially decent people at their deepest level, from the grumps, like *All in the Family*’s Archie Bunker, to the simpletons, like *The Andy Griffith Show*’s Barney Fife, to the trouble-makers, like *Happy Days*’ (ABC, 1974-84) Fonzie Fonzarelli. *Seinfeld* presents a philosophy that most people are essentially not decent, from its main characters to the people around them. Jerry and his friends treat the rare character who appears to be truly good as a novelty as rare as an alien. Jerry almost breaks up with a woman because he thinks she is too virtuous. “She’s giving and caring and genuinely concerned about the welfare of others,” he tells a sympathetic George. “I can’t be with

³⁵ “The Masseuse,” *Seinfeld*, season five, episode nine (NBC, November 18, 1993).

³⁶ “The Secret Code,” *Seinfeld*, season seven, episode seven (NBC, November 9, 1995).

³⁷ “The Burning.”

someone like that!” He decides not to break up with her after he finds a huge stash of contraceptive devices in her house, concluding to his satisfaction that she is, in fact, deprived.³⁸

Ultimately, *Seinfeld* emphasizes that its characters are bad people. In the finale, the four characters are arrested under a “Good Samaritan” law when they fail to help a person being robbed. During the trial, the episode uses flashbacks to emphasize the variety of flaws in all of their characters. Confronted with everything they have done over the years, they remain angrier at the legal requirement to be good than they are ashamed that they failed to be good. As stories of their misdeeds pile up, the characters are embarrassed that their dirty laundry is being aired for the world to see, but they never express any surprise or protest at the charge that they are not good people. On some level, they have always known this, but they have been too concerned with their own public façade to bother working on their private flaws.³⁹

Friendship Should Be Therapeutic

Somehow, these four miserable souls manage to tolerate one another. At times it seems as though they cannot live without the regular company the group provides. Jerry and George, friends since at least high school, seem stuck together. Indeed, the marriage-like consistency of their honest relationship is often alluded to, as in an episode when a journalist mistakes them for a gay couple, or another episode when Kramer and Elaine mock George for dating a woman who looks like Jerry.⁴⁰ The observation bothers the two friends, particularly George. At one point, the

³⁸ “The Sponge,” *Seinfeld*, season seven, episode nine (NBC, December 7, 1995).

³⁹ “The Finale.”

⁴⁰ The first example is from “The Outing,” *Seinfeld*, season four, episode 17 (NBC, February 11, 1993), also known as the “not that there’s anything wrong with that” episode. According to the featurette accompanying the episode on the official DVD, that line was not a part of the original script, penned by writer Larry Charles. The first table read went poorly, and the episode was shelved. Charles kept at it, eventually coming up with that tag line for Jerry and George to express their inherent homophobia while simultaneously offering a token of respect to the gay community. Airing the same year as President Clinton’s controversial “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” compromise went

audience hears his increasingly uncomfortable thoughts in a voice-over: “And so what if she does look like Jerry? What does that mean? That I could have everything I have with Jerry but because it’s a woman I could also have sex with her? And that somehow that would be exactly what I always wanted?”⁴¹ Jerry and George frequently reveal homophobic insecurities, which is ironic because if they did fall romantically in love that might be their best chance at a happy love life.⁴² They clearly enjoy spending time together, at least as much as they tolerate being with anyone else. And they communicate on an incredibly intimate level; they almost never keep secrets from each other and there is seemingly no topic of conversation that is off limits for the two of them.

In fact, all four characters listen to each other with little hesitancy. Their response is usually layered with derisive sarcasm rather than empathic affection, but their friendships endure this callousness. Their shared conversations are a safe space, where each feels comfortable speaking freely. Their combined relationships thus serve as a sort of therapeutic support group, where each person can cathartically expel his or her daily frustrations to understanding (if not always sympathetic) ears. Comfort and honesty (with some exceptions) are defining traits of the quartet, just as discomfort and dishonesty define their various romantic relationships. George is incapable of honestly expressing himself to his fiancée, Susan, throughout their fateful

into effect, the episode inadvertently captures the latent homophobia present in America at that moment amongst supposedly progressive-minded people.

⁴¹ “The Cartoon,” *Seinfeld*, season nine, episode 13 (NBC, January 29, 1998).

⁴² Other examples of the characters’ homophobia include George’s discomfort over getting a massage from a male masseuse in “The Note,” *Seinfeld*, season three, episode one (NBC, September 18, 1991); Jerry’s refusal to give mouth-to-mouth rescue breathing to a man in “The Pool Guy,” *Seinfeld*, season seven, episode eight (NBC, October 25, 1995); and the pair’s behavior in “The Jimmy,” *Seinfeld*, season six, episode 18 (NBC, March 16, 1995). In that episode, Elaine remarks to George, “You know that just admitting a man is handsome doesn’t necessarily make you a homosexual.” George replies, “It doesn’t help.” More subtly, Jerry turns down Elaine’s invitation to join her at a benefit where Mel Tormé will be singing because, as he explains, “I can’t watch a man sing a song... They get all emotional. They sway. It’s embarrassing.”

engagement in season seven. And Elaine's recurring boyfriend, David Puddy, is too simpleminded for her to connect on the same intellectual level with which she engages her three friends.

Traditionally, American sitcoms often featured a character in a role of knowing authority, typically a male father-figure who tends to look out for the other characters.⁴³ In *Seinfeld* the characters take turns speaking as authorities on each other's problems. In the series finale, before delivering the quartet's ultimate sentence, the judge wonders "how, or under what circumstances the four of you found each other."⁴⁴ *What* they found is a makeshift support group. The best, and perhaps the only way these characters are able to get through life is within a small, intimate community of like-minded friends that help contemplate every facet of life and serve as amateur therapists to help process the world's many annoyances.

Friendship in *Seinfeld* is about listening, not love. They cannot love because they cannot give of themselves, having turned themselves inside-out through their hyper-self-absorption. The four characters only care enough to listen. At least that is more than the rest of the world has to offer.

Community is a Burden

Despite taking place in New York City the world of *Seinfeld* often operates like a small town. Jerry and his friends are constantly running into familiar faces at their regular coffee shop, on the street, and even in Jerry's apartment building. This, however, is not a welcome feature of their world. Neighbors, the recurring characters in *Seinfeld*'s local community, are usually

⁴³ Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art*, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1974), 55-56.

⁴⁴ "The Finale."

impediments to happiness or even sources of misery. Thus, the four main characters strive to keep their intimate community from expanding.

Even family is excluded. Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer are, in practice if not in fact, only children; rarely, some of the characters make passing references to a brother or a sister, but siblings never appear in the series. Elaine and Kramer have fraught relationships with their parents and thus almost never see them.⁴⁵ George has fraught relationships with his mother and father, and sees them *very* often. Unemployed throughout season five, George spends a miserable year living in his parent's house before he finally has the means to move out at the end of the season. Only Jerry seems to genuinely get along with his parents, but he is happy to have them living in Florida so that he does not have to see them very often. Primarily, Jerry seeks ego-satisfying approval from his parents, rather than intimacy or love. George's parents will never give him the kind of praise Jerry routinely receives from his. Jerry's Uncle Leo, however, is almost as burdensome as George's parents because he lives in New York City and bumps into Jerry regularly. On *Seinfeld*, relationships are usually a burden, and relationships within families are imposed, not chosen.

Neighbors impose, too. Kramer, consuming Jerry's food without compensation, is an economic burden for Jerry. Kramer is also a social burden, invading Jerry's privacy at inopportune times. The two become friends mainly because Kramer inserts himself into Jerry's life. Kramer is also a friendly guy, the kindest of the quartet, and less opposed to interacting with the community. Still, Kramer, originally conceived as agoraphobic, shares enough of the group's

⁴⁵ Kramer reconciles with his mother in "The Switch," *Seinfeld*, season six, episode 11 (NBC, January 5, 1995). This is the episode when Kramer's friends discover his first name is "Cosmo."

anti-social characteristics to fit in with them.⁴⁶ He certainly shares in the pleasure the group takes in the misery of others. His frank impoliteness is often endearing (and always comical), but it is also a sign of deep self-absorption and insensitivity. Whimsy, not community, provokes his actions, from his harebrained business schemes to his ill-fated attempts at charity.

Though Kramer is more willing to engage with the community, he suffers just as often as his friends for such engagement. For example, Kramer proudly participates in an AIDS charity walk, only to be beaten up by other participants simply because he has chosen not to wear the AIDS ribbon.⁴⁷ At other points, Kramer's attempts to foster community harm his friends. The quintessential example of the characters' resistance to community occurs in an episode when Kramer organizes a bulletin board in the lobby of his and Jerry's building that displays the photos and names of every resident.

KRAMER: See, people are gonna be a lot friendlier.

JERRY: I...I don't want my picture plastered up in the lobby.

KRAMER: Imagine walking by someone on the floor, and you say "Hey, Carl!" and he says, "Hey, Jerry!" You see, that's the kind of society I wanna live in.

JERRY: Kramer, I don't wanna stop and talk with everyone every time I go in the building. I just wanna nod and be on my way.

Seinfeld had survived on *Cheers'* coattails in its first years before eventually building its own ratings success. But a place like the bar, Cheers, "where everybody knows your name" is a sort of nightmare to Jerry. He prefers a private life with only a couple close friends.

⁴⁶ In the series pilot, Kramer (then called Kessler) finds Jerry watching a New York Mets game and says, "You know, I almost wound up going to that game." Jerry rolls his eyes and points out, "Yeah you almost went to the game. You haven't been out of the building in ten years!" (From "Good News, Bad News.") By the end of season two, Kramer was venturing outdoors regularly.

⁴⁷ "The Sponge," *Seinfeld*, season seven, episode nine (NBC, December 7, 1995). This is the first episode to mention AIDS, despite the series overlapping the rapid expansion of the disease in America. In a show that so often depicts its characters having casual sex, AIDS is the elephant in Jerry's apartment. The title of this episode refers to the female birth control product Elaine and George's fiancée Susan prefer. Ironically, the use of condoms is put down as the characters search for remaining boxes of the sponge, which is going off the market. I do not think *Seinfeld* had a responsibility to educate viewers about AIDS, but it would have been refreshing if the series had addressed its characters' fears about sexually transmitted diseases with the show's typical blunt humor rather than largely pretending AIDS did not exist.

Neighborliness is a cause for discomfort and anxiety as opposed to the comfort and satisfaction Kramer envisions. Kramer's idealism rests on a familiar cliché that Jerry correctly (according to *Seinfeld's* ideology) dismisses. Relationships are usually burdensome, as Jerry knows all too well from his existing relationships. In the same episode, his senile grandmother revealed that Uncle Leo was supposed to give his mother \$50 after their father won \$100 at the track decades ago, but Leo denies the charge. Meanwhile, Jerry is also annoyed by Elaine's friend, Wendy, who has a habit of kissing him hello every time they meet. Jerry detests the "kiss hello." Alas, when Kramer does get Jerry's photo up in the lobby, Jerry runs a gauntlet of kisses every time he walks in the building. He brings his frustration to Kramer.

KRAMER: You should be thanking me for liberating you from your world of loneliness and isolation. Now, you're part of a family.

JERRY: Family?

KRAMER: Yeah.

JERRY: You think I want another family? My father's demanding my uncle pay interest on fifty dollars he was supposed to give my mother in 1941, and my uncle put my Nana in a home to try and shut her up! And I tell you another thing, Cosmo Kramer, whatever you wanna be called. The kissing thing is over. There's no more kissing, and I don't care what the consequences are.

[KRAMER GRABS JERRY'S FACE AND GIVES HIM A LONG KISS ON THE LIPS JUST AS GEORGE ENTERS. WITHOUT A WORD GEORGE PAUSES A MOMENT AND THEN BACKS OUT OF THE ROOM.]

Kramer cannot accept that Jerry enjoys his loneliness and isolation, but Jerry knows from experience that it is easier to live alone and isolated than deal with the burdens of relationships.

TV's Third Places: *Cheers's* Bar Versus *Seinfeld's* Coffee Shop

Most of the action in *Seinfeld* takes place in Jerry's apartment, which, like many sitcom living rooms, functions as a semi-public space, a location for the characters to gather and discuss the latest plot points. Somewhat to Jerry's chagrin, George, Elaine, and especially Kramer come and go as they please. Jerry's enemy, Newman also drops by frequently because he lives in the building and because he is often visiting Kramer, who lives across the hall. Many other

characters manage to drop by Jerry's place too to hash out whatever issue has cropped up in a given episode. Still, though reality is often thwarting his intentions, Jerry thinks of his apartment as a private space where he can pursue sexual intimacy with his procession of girlfriends or where he can relax by himself.

When the four friends do go out together in public, it is usually to their local diner, Monk's. The exterior establishing shot (a convention used in television and film to indicate where the proceeding scene takes place) shows a large sign that reads "RESTAURANT" hanging above the windows.⁴⁸ Inside, Monk's looks like a diner. It has an open floor plan with an orderly arrangement of composite surface tables and simple wooden chairs surrounded by red pleather booths on two sides, a counter on the third side, and restrooms at the back. Each table has ketchup and mustard squeeze bottles, salt and pepper shakers, a little box of sugar and sweeteners, and a metal napkin dispenser.

In the show's early seasons, the four characters usually sat in a booth near the window. Eventually, they moved 90-degrees around the set's layout to another booth that, with the tables and space behind them populated by extras acting as customers and wait staff, lent the space a much busier feel. Wide shots of this booth include Monk's front door, allowing characters to enter and exit on camera. Monk's is labeled a restaurant and looks like a diner, but Jerry and his friends almost always call it "the coffee shop."

Indeed, within the series, Monk's functions more like a coffee shop and less like a restaurant. The space is primarily used for conversation, and secondarily for sipping coffee. Food is occasionally a part of the Monk's experience, but, while they go to dinner at many other

⁴⁸ If the camera moved around the corner, it would pick up the full name of the real, still-existing establishment, "Tom's Restaurant." Tom's is located on 2880 Broadway, near Columbia University, right in the Upper Westside neighborhood where Jerry and his friends lived. Its interior looks nothing like the Monk's set used for *Seinfeld*.

restaurants throughout the series, if they do get a meal at Monk's, it is mainly for convenience. They are hanging out there anyway, a mealtime is approaching, so they may as well eat.

Talking is their main activity at the coffee shop, but it would be inaccurate to say they go to the coffee shop to talk. Nor do they necessarily go to the coffee shop to get a coffee. They go there because it is a place they can go. This exchange from the fourth episode of the series, although it does not specifically reference Monk's, is indicative of the role of the coffee shop for the group's little community:

ELAINE: Come on, let's go do something. I don't want to just sit around here.

JERRY: Okay.

ELAINE: Want to go get something to eat?

JERRY: Where do you want to go?

ELAINE: I don't care. I'm not hungry.

JERRY: We could go to one of those cappuccino places. They let you just sit there.

ELAINE: What are we gonna do there? Talk?

JERRY: We can talk.

ELAINE: I'll go if I don't have to talk.

JERRY: We'll just sit there.⁴⁹

The coffee shop is a more public alternative to Jerry's apartment. It is not a home, thus it is a neutral space. It is also a relief from the responsibilities of the workplace. It is a place where the gang can sit and be someplace. They do not even have to talk, though they usually end up doing so. It thus offers many of the features of what Ray Oldenburg calls a "third place" in *The Great Good Place*.⁵⁰

As we will see, Oldenburg's book influenced the way Howard Shultz, the C.E.O. of Starbucks, the emerging coffee giant, thought about the design of his company's stores and their

⁴⁹ "Male Unbonding."

⁵⁰ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*, 2nd ed. (New York: Marlowe, 1997).

potential role in their communities. It also reveals both the failure of the coffee shop in *Seinfeld* as well as the success of the bar in *Cheers* in fostering community. Originally published the same year as *Seinfeld*'s pilot, *The Great Good Place* laments the disappearance of "core settings of informal public life" in America: taverns, corner stores, and Main Streets. America's organization of its suburbs has left no room for such locations where engagement with neighbors happens naturally and effortlessly. The typical American splits his time between home (the first place) and work (the second place), commuting between the two in the lonely bubble of his automobile. Within this geography, he finds little motivation for civic or political participation. The consequence of this arrangement is the social fragmentation in America that so many cultural critics have observed and decried.

The bar in *Cheers* contains many of the ideal characteristics of a "third place." It is an escape from the demands at home and work. The company found there provides a relief from stress. The bar is a neutral place where people may come and go as they please. It is also a leveling place where a mailman, a psychiatrist, and a frequently out of work accountant may gather together as friends without reference to their social status. Conversation is the main activity in *Cheers*; staff, strangers, and regulars all partake. And it is the regulars who give the *Cheers* bar its life and appeal. While the show's stories usually center on the staff, particularly Sam Malone (Ted Danson), Diane Chambers (Shelley Long) and later Rebecca Howe (Kirstie Alley), the regular customers create the essential fabric of the show's community, and supply a critical ingredient for its success. *Cheers* is the bridge between the workplace sitcoms of the seventies and the friends-as-family sitcoms of the nineties; the regulars push it into the latter category.⁵¹

⁵¹ Oldenburg, "Chapter Two: The Character of Third Places," 20-42.

Similar to the best “third places” in Oldenburg’s estimation, the bar in *Cheers* is welcoming, clean, and beautiful in its own way, though not particularly elegant. It has a low profile, literally; it is located below street level. The mood inside is playful; the shouted greeting to “Norm!” is one of the bar’s running jokes and routines that give the regulars a sense of informal membership. Finally, the bar offers a home away from home. Indeed, the relationships fostered in the bar setting are often stronger than the unseen families of some of the characters.⁵²

The characters in *Cheers* enjoy many of the benefits Oldenburg predicts should result from access to a thriving “third place,” including a stimulating break from their dull daily routines, contact with individuals holding drastically different perspectives on the world, and general emotional improvement. Most of all, the *Cheers* characters enjoy friendships of similar depth of intimacy to those on *Seinfeld*. The relationships on *Cheers*, unlike *Seinfeld*, mostly originated in the comfort of their public space. And while the *Seinfeld* quartet often tries to resist even the most basic pleasantries with people around them, the *Cheers* friends enjoy or at least more easily tolerate the informal interactions inherent to a bar. There is a friendly atmosphere in the Cheers of *Cheers* that is absent in the Monk’s of *Seinfeld*.⁵³

The coffee shop in *Seinfeld* should function similarly to the bar in *Cheers*. In fact, the coffee shop shares all of these characteristics to at least some degree. And yet, the characters on *Seinfeld* do not experience the social benefits enjoyed by the characters on *Cheers*. They remain the sort of self-centered, socially isolated individuals living the sort of lonely lives Oldenburg predicts will result from a lack of “third places”:

In the sustained absence of a healthy and vigorous informal public life, the citizenry may quite literally forget how to create one. A facilitating public etiquette consisting of rituals necessary to the meeting, greeting, and enjoyment of strangers

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Oldenburg, “Chapter Three: The Personal Benefits,” 43-65.

is not much in evidence in the United States. It is replaced by a set of strategies designed to avoid contact with people in public, by devices intended to preserve the individual's circle of privacy against any stranger who might violate it. ... The cosmopolitan promise of our cities is diminished. Its ecumenic spirit fades with our ever-increasing retreat into privacy.⁵⁴

Did, as Oldenburg suggests, America's post-war social geography inadvertently sap the nation's desire for the kinds of informal social connections that are formed and sustained in "third places?"⁵⁵ Or did Americans, consciously or unconsciously, organize their lives out of an inherent desire to interact with the bare minimum number of their neighbors and fellow citizens, as Jerry seems to have done? Which came first, the demise of spaces that serve as an "egg" allowing community to grow within, or the proliferation of people like Jerry who are too "chicken" to engage themselves with their community? The *Seinfeld* coffee shop is exactly the kind of "third place" Oldenburg thinks Americans miss, and yet the characters resist the attributes of the "third place" he claims Americans desire and reject the benefits of the "third place" he thinks America sorely needs.

The characters on *Seinfeld* end up in the coffee shop almost every episode, though they are rarely shown making plans to meet there. When one member of the group shows up, he or she is greeted warmly but without much surprise. Sometimes a scene or an episode begins in the coffee shop with no explanation for why the characters have arrived there. The audience is expected to accept their presence in the familiar setting without explanation, just as viewers have been doing for similar public settings throughout sitcom history. The coffee shop is an inherent part of the fabric of their lives, just like the bar in *Cheers* or the drive-in restaurant in *Happy Days*.

⁵⁴ Oldenburg, 13.

⁵⁵ Oldenburg, 203.

The characters are often annoyed when the familiar dynamic of the coffee shop is threatened. For example, when George is engaged to Susan throughout season seven, he savors his time with his friends at the coffee shop as an escape from his increasingly miserable relationship to his fiancée and the adult responsibilities that relationship demands. In the episode “The Pool Guy,” he is horrified when Susan begins to enjoy the company of his friends.⁵⁶ “If she is allowed to infiltrate this world then George Costanza as you know him ceases to exist!” he rants to Jerry. “You see, right now I have Relationship George, but there is also Independent George. That’s the George you know, the George you grew up with. Movie George. Coffee Shop George. Liar George. Bawdy George.” In George’s mind, “Coffee Shop George” is an essential piece of his individual personality that his fiancée can have no part of. George seems selfish in this scene, but Oldenburg would sympathize. When George does arrive at the coffee shop one day to find Susan sitting with Jerry, Elaine, and Kramer, he immediately turns around and leaves, finding lonely sanctuary in Reggie’s, a lesser alternative to Monk’s that the characters sometimes are forced to patronize, always to their chagrin. It lacks so many of the familiar comforts of their usual “third place.”

However, family is only one category from which the *Seinfeld* characters seek to escape in the coffee shop, and George’s reaction to Susan is only an exaggerated version of the displeasure the characters often display when they see any other familiar face. In “The Soup,” Jerry’s acquaintance, Kenny Bania, repeatedly runs into him at the coffee shop. Bania is perfectly friendly.⁵⁷ He even offers to give Jerry a brand new suit that no longer fits him, the kind of economic exchange Oldenburg observes as typical of the social behavior in “third places.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ “The Pool Guy,” *Seinfeld*, season seven, episode eight (NBC, November 16, 1995).

⁵⁷ “The Soup,” *Seinfeld*, season six, episode seven (NBC, November 10, 1994).

⁵⁸ Oldenburg, 43.

However, refuting Oldenburg, Jerry gets no pleasure from either Bania's affability or his generosity. He is annoyed at the expected exchange of social capital that accompanies the offer of the suit; like George, Jerry seeks to keep his social responsibilities at a bare minimum. And Jerry does not enjoy Bania's company. Later in the episode, when Bania reappears at the coffee shop, Jerry gets George to slide to the end of the booth where they are sitting in an unsuccessful attempt to dissuade Bania from joining them. To be sure, Oldenburg points out that in a "third place" people are likely to encounter those whose company they do not enjoy.⁵⁹ In the case of Jerry and his friends, this happens so frequently that it seems like the only company they can regularly tolerate is one another's.⁶⁰

In the same episode, George has a rare positive interaction with Kelly, one of Monk's waitresses. They flirt, and George works up the courage to ask her on a date. Their outing goes well until Kelly, perhaps reacting to George's musings on the beauty of the word "manure," mentions she has a boyfriend. George eventually learns she was lying, and their relationship abruptly cools. The ensuing awkwardness leads George to dine at Reggie's at the end of the episode. He is alone; his friends would rather stick with the comfort of Monk's than remain loyal to their friend and bear Reggie's mediocrity.⁶¹

George's brief friendship with the waitress is an anomaly. Usually the characters in *Seinfeld* maintain a polite but distant relationship with the staff at the coffee shop in complete contrast to the warm friendships that form between the staff and regulars at *Cheers*. Sometimes

⁵⁹ Oldenburg, 29.

⁶⁰ Jerry, in particular, has a long list of unwanted friendships, including Joel Horneck in "Male Unbonding;" Steve Pocatello in "The Stranded," *Seinfeld*, season three, episode 10 (NBC, November 27, 1991); Michael and Carol in "The Hamptons," *Seinfeld*, season five, episode 20 (NBC, May 12, 1994); and Ramon in the aforementioned episode "The Pool Guy."

⁶¹ Amusingly, the show reused the footage of George eating alone in Reggie's in "The Soup" for his similar exile in "The Pool Guy."

Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer clash with the staff. In “The Soup,” the coffee shop’s manager (sometimes credited in other episodes as the cook or the owner) angrily tells Jerry and Elaine to warn their friend not to cause trouble for Kelly after George repeatedly calls the restaurant in an attempt to get her fired. The same character appears in several other episodes throughout the series, each time clashing with Jerry or his friends.

The counter seats at Monk’s might force the gang to engage with the staff. However, in the one episode where the lack of alternative seating forces them to sit on the bar stools, their experience is comically disastrous. When Kramer joins Jerry and George at the counter, he sits so that George is in the middle. He and Jerry have a difficult time communicating with George in between them, and George, uncomfortable trying to eat with Kramer leaning over his food, asks Kramer to stare straight ahead as he speaks. Things get worse when Elaine arrives and sits next to Jerry, on the opposite end from Kramer. “I hate the counter,” she mutters, echoing Jerry’s comment from moments before. She proceeds to fill him in on her latest problems, but, as in a parlor game of “telephone,” her story gets mangled as it is translated down the counter to Kramer. In fact, he does not even realize Elaine has arrived until, finally, a booth opens up and the quartet hurries to claim it. On the way over, Kramer gravely tells Elaine that Newman died, but the news is a misheard fragment of Elaine’s conversation with Jerry.⁶² Not once do any of the four attempt to engage the staff working at the counter, which might have “triangulated” their conversation, curing the unease of staring straight ahead. The alignment of the counter underscores the four characters’ discomfort with the world of people around them. They prefer

⁶² “The Maid, *Seinfeld*, season nine, episode 19 (NBC, April 30, 1998). This was the third-to-last episode of the entire series, and the counter scene is a typical late-period *Seinfeld* gag that pokes fun of the behavioral norms of the characters. The scene answers the imagined question, why do they never sit at the counter?

the booth's womb-like safety, where they can focus on each other and avoid all other human interaction.

Ruthie Cohen, the cashier at the coffee shop, exemplifies the place of Monk's staff in the series. She appeared in the background in the coffee shop in 101 episodes out of 172, but spoke in almost none of them. In "The Gum," George gets into a feud with her after he mistakenly believes she short-changed him.⁶³ Though George eventually realizes he owes her an apology, their reconciliation is never depicted, and Ruthie returns to her silent post near the coffee shop's front door.

While their relationship with the staff of the coffee shop is not always unfriendly, it is usually impersonal. Though they are at the coffee shop almost every episode, the characters on *Seinfeld* are as uninterested in building friendships with the staff as they are at maintaining friendships with anyone else outside their quartet. Even placing an order is one more nuisance the characters would rather avoid. In "The Pledge Drive," George becomes convinced a waitress is discretely giving him the middle finger every time she comes to the table.⁶⁴ Despite the occasional clashes with the staff and the risk of running into a familiar face, the space serves its purpose as a public location for the group's own intimate community to meet.

At the very beginning, in *Seinfeld*'s pilot, the social dynamic at the coffee shop was warmer. In the show's very first scene, Jerry and George are sitting in a different diner set.⁶⁵ It is a smaller diner, and more warmly lit, unlike Monk's fluorescent sterility. Jerry and George interact with the waitress as a friend; indeed, the part, played by prolific character actress Lee Garlington, was intended to be a regular character in the series. When the show was picked up

⁶³ "The Gum," *Seinfeld*, season seven, episode 10 (NBC, December 14, 1995).

⁶⁴ "The Pledge Drive," *Seinfeld*, season six, episode three (NBC, October 6, 1994).

⁶⁵ "Good News, Bad News."

several months later, the waitress part was excised from the show and the coffee shop scenes were filmed in a different set. It is not, then, that *Seinfeld* never depicted a friendlier coffee shop. In contrast to *Cheers*, *Seinfeld* deliberately removed all traces of this original social connection between the staff of its coffee shop and its characters.

Also unlike the people enjoying drinks in the background in *Cheers*, the extras in the coffee shop do not eavesdrop or react to the conversations between the characters in *Seinfeld* unless something particularly loud or noticeable happens. In *Cheers*, the extras can frequently be observed looking at and sometimes laughing with the main characters. This does happen once in *Seinfeld*'s pilot, though not in the coffee shop. George and Jerry are having a conversation in a laundromat and some of the other customers can be seen looking on with interest. George notices and actually calls them out on their eavesdropping, asking sarcastically, "Any questions?" Embarrassed, the extras turn away. Extras would rarely pay attention for the rest of the series, as if George's comment had scared all of the extras throughout the show from looking in his direction. For the rest of the series, Jerry and his friends seek insulation from interactions with strangers, settling into a neighborhood coffee shop that offers impersonal service and only the occasional nuisance of familiar faces. In the meantime, the culture of the American coffee shop itself was becoming a more suitable place for Jerry and his friends.

Coffee and America in the Nineties

Throughout the nineties, Starbucks rapidly expanded, both in New York and across the country. Within eight years of opening its first store on the island, Starbucks had 124 locations in Manhattan, more than even the city's ubiquitous drug store, Duane Reade. By then, there were

over 4,000 Starbucks in North America, accounting for one quarter of the coffee shops in the United States.⁶⁶

American spending had long since proven Starbucks was a hit, but the chain's version of coffee culture had its detractors. In 1998, *New York Times* contributor and Upper West Side resident Carol Peace Robins yearned nostalgically for the era "B.S. (Before Starbucks)," when "coffee shops were warm and comfortable." Bemoaning New Yorkers' obsession with the crowded, expensive new chain, Robins reminisced, "You'd walk in and plunk yourself down in a booth (remember booths?) where you'd eat a two-egg breakfast special for \$1.95 including refills of non-designer coffee." Robins, writing a month after *Seinfeld*'s final episode aired, noted, "Just for the record, you didn't see Jerry, Elaine, George and Kramer in a Starbucks. They hung out in a coffee shop. In a booth. Where they could sit face to face and whine." The quartet may have been an anti-social bunch, but at least they sought regular, face-to-face conversation. The Starbucks culture Robins bemoans features tiny, solitary stools and cramped spaces unfit for socializing.⁶⁷

Starbucks aficionados rallied to its defense. One letter writer wrote:

*For those of us who lament the usually awful coffee available in most 'coffee shops...' the advent of Starbucks and half a dozen other excellent specialty coffee houses is a dream come true. If Ms. Robins isn't enough of a coffee maven, then she can continue visiting those locations where a full table is available to spread out her newspaper or books. But the brown water served as coffee in the settings she describes offer no competition when one can inhale the coffee aroma in Starbucks, in spite of the limited space.*⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Terry Pristin, "Veni, Venti, Grande: Starbucks Strikes Deep in a Wary Land of Pushcarts and Delis," *New York Times*, April 29, 2002, B1.

⁶⁷ Carol Peace Robins, "Life before Starbucks: New Yorkers are Turning away from a Proud Coffee Heritage," *New York Times*, June 14, 1998, CY17.

⁶⁸ Pearl Greenberg, "Letter: Starbucks Saved the City from a Lot of Bad Coffee," *New York Times*, July 5, 1998, CY13.

Starbucks did not bring “designer coffee” to New York City; specialty coffee retailers were springing up around Manhattan in the years before Starbucks first appeared on the island.⁶⁹ And it apparently did not set out to create a few hundred tiny, crowded stores that favored grab-and-go purchases or single customers sitting alone at a small table with a laptop or a newspaper; the original Starbucks Upper West Side store was a whopping 2,200 square feet with two separate espresso bars and plenty of comfortable seats...until it closed in 2003.⁷⁰

Schultz’s Vision: Starbucks as Third Place?

The Starbucks boom occurred under the guidance of Howard Schultz, CEO from 1987 to 2000. When Schultz joined the company in 1982, Starbucks was a tiny store in Seattle that sold whole bean coffee and the equipment for its customers to make it themselves. As Schultz explains it, his vision for transforming Starbucks came on a trip to Milan. “I discovered the ritual and romance of coffee bars in Italy,” he recalled in his memoir, *Pour Your Heart Into It*:

Each one had its own unique character, but there was one common thread: the camaraderie between the customers, who knew each other well, and the barista, who was performing with flair... To the Italians, the coffee bar is not a diner, as coffee shops came to be in America in the 1950s and 1960s. It is an extension of the front porch, an extension of the home. Each morning they stop at their favorite coffee bar, where they’re treated with a cup of espresso that they know is custom-made. In American terms, the person behind the counter is an unskilled worker, but he becomes an artist when he prepares a cup of coffee. The coffee baristas of Italy have a respected place in their neighborhoods.⁷¹

Schultz did succeed in transforming America’s coffee culture. Starbucks’s success proved Americans would spend a premium for better tasting coffee. Schultz also believes he transplanted something of the ambience of Italian espresso bars to America. “In some

⁶⁹ Moriarty, 1994.

⁷⁰ Elliot Rebhun, “For a Latte Landmark, the Last Drop,” *New York Times*, August 31, 2003.

⁷¹ Schultz and Yang, 51-52.

communities, Starbucks stores have become a Third Place,” Schultz boasts, “a comfortable, sociable gathering spot away from home and work, like an extension of the front porch.”⁷² But most Starbucks are not “third places,” as even Schultz himself admits.

In the middle of his book, Schultz describes the importance of the coffee bar as a place for “casual social interaction.” One advertising agency seeking to secure Starbucks as a client interviewed customers in and around Los Angeles. It discovered the contradictory fact that, while customers claimed their favorite aspect of Starbucks was the social feeling of its stores, less than 10% of the people they observed inside the Starbucks actually talked to anyone other than the person taking their order. Schultz recognizes that his customers were responding to merely the hint of a “third place” that Starbucks offered, away from their families and co-workers:

In America, we are in danger of losing the kind of casual social interaction that is part of the daily routine for many Europeans. In the 1990s, coffee bars became a central component of the American social scene in part because they fulfilled the need for a nonthreatening gathering spot, a “third place” outside of work and home. Ray Oldenburg, a Florida sociology professor, wrote most eloquently of this need in his book, *The Great Good Place* (1989).⁷³

Oldenburg’s thesis tickles Schultz’s memory of his first exposure to Italian espresso bars.

“People need informal public places where they can gather, put aside the concerns of work and home, relax, and talk.”⁷⁴ Schultz is paraphrasing Oldenburg here, but he goes on to quote Oldenburg directly, setting off his words as a block quote as if to emphasize the stakes:

⁷² Ibid., 5.

⁷³ Schultz and Yang, 120.

⁷⁴ Schultz and Yang, 120.

Without such places, the urban area fails to nourish the kinds of relationships and the diversity of human contact that are the essence of the city. Deprived of these settings, people remain lonely with their crowds.⁷⁵

Schultz thinks Americans' hunger for "third places" is a crucial reason for Starbucks' success. The ascendance of the internet in the 1990s and WiFi in the 2000s helped make coffee shops a comfortable alternative for people to get work done away from either the office or home. Starbucks, quieter and tamer than a typical bar, became a preferred hangout for teenagers and twenty-somethings, a place to meet before or after a movie, or just a comfortable spot to chat. Schultz says a man and a woman even wanted to get married at a Starbucks, one of probably countless couples for whom the chain played a critical part of their courtship.⁷⁶

Still, for all of these ways that Starbucks serves as an informal public gathering space, it still falls well short of Oldenburg's description of an ideal "third place." While the coffee bar is a neutral, leveling place that offers respite from the stress of work and the responsibilities of home, Starbucks are not normally places of vibrant informal interaction among their clientele. Few real world Starbucks offer the same feeling of an informal community that forms the atmospheric heart of *Cheers*. Schultz acknowledges, "Starbucks stores are not yet the ideal Third Place. We don't have a lot of seating, and customers don't often get to know people they meet there. Most just grab their coffee and depart."⁷⁷ Most critically, conversation is not the primary activity in American coffee bars. Thus, the rich community experience Oldenburg and Schultz think

⁷⁵ Schultz and Yang, 120. (From Oldenburg, xxviii.) This section is unique within the memoir for its extensive discussion of an academic theory, so I am not sure Schultz catches Oldenburg's allusion to David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*. The rest of the book consists of anecdotes and lessons drawn from successful businesspeople encountered both within and beyond the coffee business. Of course, it is possible Schultz's co-author, Yang, introduced Oldenburg's ideas into the book. Still, while I would hesitate to offer a firm assessment of the degree of Oldenburg's influence on Schultz, Oldenburg's idea of a "third place" certainly complements Schultz's ideas for how a Starbucks should look and feel.

⁷⁶ Schultz and Yang, 121.

⁷⁷ Schultz and Yang, 120.

Americans yearn for is rarely fully realized. When conversation is going on in a coffee bar, it is usually on an intimate level. As in *Seinfeld*, the conversation almost never ranges beyond the few people implicitly invited to partake.

Perhaps if *Seinfeld* had been launched in 1994, the year Starbucks first opened its Manhattan store, instead of 1989, Monk's would have been a specialty coffee shop instead of a diner the friends called a "coffee shop." Indeed, *Seinfeld*'s most successful imitator *did* air its first episode in the fall of 1994, and its characters *did* hang out in a comfortable-looking, Starbucks-like specialty coffee shop. The show was *Friends*, and the fictional coffee shop was Central Perk.

Friends

Central Perk is more entwined in the lives of the characters on *Friends* than Monk's is in the lives of the characters on *Seinfeld*. An extension of the characters' nearby apartments, Central Perk is furnished like a living room, with a couch and two chairs, just enough space for the six characters to interact—and no one else.⁷⁸ Unlike Monk's ordered, more spacious, diner-style layout, Central Perk is cozier and more colorful. It is thus even better-suited than Monk's to serve as a thriving "third place." Alas, the characters on *Friends* have no interest in connecting with anyone else in the coffee shop, from the other customers to the staff.

Another of the *Friends* sextet, Phoebe, often sings and plays guitar at Central Perk. Hilariously for the audience but sadly for Central Perk's clientele, her playing and singing is terrible, and the content of her self-composed songs—including "Sue, Sue, Suicide," "Shut Up and Go Home," and most famously "Smelly Cat"—detract further from her performance. Central

⁷⁸ The characters are often flummoxed when strangers are occupying their seats. Two guys harass Ross and Chandler, preventing them from sitting in the couch in "The One with the Bullies," *Friends*, season two, episode 21 (NBC, April 25, 1996).

Perk's customers barely tolerate her at best, though they prefer Phoebe's singing to Ross's lengthy musical odysseys on his keyboard when he takes Central Perk's stage in one episode.⁷⁹

Departing from the detached attitude *Seinfeld's* quartet exhibits towards the staff at Monk's, two of the characters on *Friends* take temporary jobs as servers—Rachel from the first episode through season three and Joey in season six. Neither is particularly adept the job.⁸⁰ Rachel bungles orders out of inattention. Joey slacks off in his responsibilities out of immaturity. When the other friends are in the coffee shop, they forget their job entirely. In contrast, Sam Malone and the rest of the bar staff on *Cheers* remain attentive to their duties even as they engage with their regular friends, happily taking care of every customer who politely steps up to the bar, stranger or regular. Because of this, *Cheers* has a more welcoming, communal atmosphere than Central Perk.

Throughout the series, the six friends regularly interact with Central Perk's manager, Gunther. Like Ruthie in *Seinfeld*, Gunther appears in more episodes than any other actor other than the main cast. Working the coffee bar in the background, the bleached blonde actor did not have a line until midway through the second season.⁸¹ Eventually, Gunther becomes a more active part of the series, interacting with the group regularly at the coffee shop, although he

⁷⁹ "The One Where Chandler Crosses the Line," *Friends*, season four, episode seven (November 13, 1997).⁸⁰ Two decades on, Central Perk's use of servers seems odd compared to the way espresso bars have tended to operate, either Starbucks or independent. When was the last time you saw two customers walk into a coffee shop, sit down at a table, and shout out to the employees, "Can we get some cappuccino over here?!?" It happens in "The One with the Dozen Lasagnas," *Friends*, season one, episode 12 (NBC, January 12, 1995). The creators of *Friends* seem to be mixing up the dynamics of a diner and a coffee shop. Or, perhaps more likely, the espresso bar culture itself was not yet stabilized in the mid-1990s. Americans have since learned the implicit expectations and routines of buying a cappuccino. Again, Starbucks probably deserves the credit for normalizing the process of queuing up, ordering, and waiting near the bar for your drink.

⁸¹ His first word comes in "The One with Phoebe's Dad," *Friends*, season two, episode nine (NBC, December 14, 1995). Ross, seeking to get rid of a gift slinky rejected by Rachel, asks Gunther, "You got stairs in your place?" Gunther replies with one word, "Yeah," and gets the slinky. On *Seinfeld*, Ruthie had to wait even longer for a line, running the cash register at Monk's from the first episode of season four to the middle of season seven before speaking to George in "The Gum."

rarely plays a large part in most plots. Gunther and Ruthie are similar characters; both are humorless, inexpressive, and curt. They are both working class, performing their duties within the service industry with a heroic consistency that makes Joey and Rachel look aloof and entitled in their brief stints as waiters.

Besides his distinctive hair, Gunther's defining characteristic is his unrequited crush on Rachel, gradually revealed to the audience throughout the series. Despite his presence in their lives, and in spite of his occasionally friendly intentions, and the rare invitation to a few of their parties, Gunther is never integrated into the group of friends. That fact is often poked fun at during the series; it seems the characters are occasionally aware that he is around enough to perhaps warrant a closer friendship. In "The One with the Worst Best Man Ever," a season four episode, Joey, planning a bachelor party for Ross, feels compelled to invite Gunther. "Okay, now, uh, in terms of the invite list," Joey ponders aloud to Ross in the coffee shop, "I've got you, me, and Chandler and I'm gonna invite Gunther 'cause, well, we've been talking about this pretty loud." Gunther accepts the invitation with his typical dryness and stoicism. Later, at the end of the party, Chandler, peeved that Ross did not name him his best man, announces to the attendees, "I've decided that my best man is my best friend Gunther!" Gunther turns to him wearily and asks, "What's my last name?" Caught, Chandler guesses, "Central Perk?"⁸²

Unfortunately for Gunther, the sextet in *Friends*, like the quartet in *Seinfeld*, is a closed group. Gunther cannot escape the essential way the friends think of him; he is merely and ultimately an employee at the coffee shop who performs a service in exchange for money. This, perhaps, is also the problem for the staff at Monk's. The characters on *Seinfeld* see the waitresses and the cashier as cogs in the service industry that supplies the food and coffee for their

⁸² "The One with the Worst Best Man Ever," *Friends*, season four, episode 22 (NBC, April 30, 1998).

enjoyment. The detached relationship between customer and employee is a feature of America's post-industrial economy that is difficult for a "third place" to overcome. As the distance between Americans and the foods and goods they consume grows greater, so too does the detachment between consumer and server of those foods and goods. The friendship between Sam Malone and his regulars seems increasingly passé.

The coffee shop on *Friends*, with its large couch and big armchairs, is at least as comfortable as the most inviting, coziest of Starbucks stores. And yet, neither succeeds as a "third place" in the way Oldenburg envisions. The characters on *Friends*, though a little kinder and a little less neurotic than the characters on *Seinfeld*, live in an equally detached world revolving around their intimate relationships. This detachment is not merely the result of the sitcom aesthetic, which naturally revolves around the intertwined lives of a limited cast of actors. The characters often go out of their way to limit their interactions with the people they encounter in their coffee shops. In one episode of *Friends*, the six characters enter Central Perk to discover it is even more crowded than usual, and their usual seats are occupied. The group cannot even conceive of mingling with the crowd and potentially connecting with other people. Rather than waiting around to see if some seats become available, they back out of the coffee shop without a word, and go their own way.⁸³

The characters in *Friends* and especially in *Seinfeld* are usually perturbed when a person outside their intimate community interrupts their lives. When juxtaposed with these later shows on NBC's ratings rich Thursday night schedule, *Cheers* reveals a distinct shift in only a decade from possibility to improbability of a healthy "third place." Throughout the nineties, the two

⁸³ "The One with the Princess Leia Fantasy," *Friends*, season three, episode one (NBC, September 19, 1996).

most popular sitcoms presented an ideology that emphasized intimate relationships with a few close friends at the complete expense of engagement with the local community.⁸⁴

Consequences

The main characters in *Seinfeld* and *Friends* are uninterested in participating in their wider community, to say the least. In the last episode of *Seinfeld*, society punishes the main characters for their smug indifference to the needs of a man in trouble specifically, and the sum of their social misbehaving in general. *Friends* and the many other less successful friends-as-family shows that mimicked *Seinfeld*'s successful premise never reveal such a self-critical take on their characters. The *Friends* sextet is a more caring group, but the close friends cannot seem to connect beyond their circle.⁸⁵ Indeed, almost incestuously, four of the six end up romantically coupled to each other, having never been able to find a suitable match outside of the circle.

For all their faults and through all the complications they encounter, the four friends in *Seinfeld* and the six in *Friends* remain in each other's lives. They abide each other, with their lives entwined almost to a fault. They cannot seem to operate in public without at least one other member of the group accompanying them. Oldenburg sees this behavior mirrored in reality and is quite critical of the tendency:

The key, I have no doubt, to the sustained level of activity [along a 1940s small U.S. town's Main Street] lay in the fact that the great majority of persons who

⁸⁴ Other nineties sitcoms with an urban setting depicted their characters hanging out in coffee shops. Dr. Frasier Crane went from hanging out at the bar in *Cheers* bar, to the relatively less-social coffee shop Café Nervosa on the spin-off, *Frasier* (NBC, 1993-2004). That popular show scored high ratings with a consistency that approached *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. *Ellen* (ABC, 1994-98, originally titled *These Friends of Mine*) was never a top-ten show, though it was, of course, culturally significant for the sexual identity of its star, Ellen DeGeneres, and the character she played. In the series, the character Ellen owns Buy the Book, a coffee shop as much as it was a bookstore.

⁸⁵ Not to excuse a larger and long-running problem in Hollywood, but this aspect of *Friends*' ideology may help to explain why the series seemed incapable of featuring black characters, though *Friends* was regularly criticized for the fact. The six friends could not successfully integrate *anyone* into their group, black or white. For a commentary on the addition of the show's first central character who was black, see Mathew Gilbert, "'Friends' Diversity Too Little, Too Late?" *Boston Globe*, April 23, 2003, C1.

visited the places along Main Street and who did so with a desire for company in mind, did so *alone* [Oldenburg's emphasis]. It is this characteristic that modern communities fail to achieve and that is so much missed in modern life. Those who have found a place where they can stop in as lone individuals and find association and camaraderie awaiting them are indeed as rare as they are fortunate. Most of us have to go with friends to a place in order to have someone to talk to when we get there. We must plan, we must make arrangements, we must try to establish a set time as well as a set place in order to regularize whatever third association we can claim.⁸⁶

Oldenburg would trace this behavioral shift back to suburbanization and the accompanying destruction of "third places," but the dynamics of friendship have also changed in America. Increasingly in the nineties, young, white professionals without kids made their homes in the recovering downtown sections of America's cities, though this trend was slightly exaggerated in popular culture by the proliferation of shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends*.⁸⁷ With family and other reliable hometown social structures left behind, it is no wonder young Americans would prioritize securing intimate friendships over investing in informal relationships.

Oldenburg argues the ideal of companionate marriage arose as a result of suburbanization.⁸⁸ Not only does this ideal threaten "third place" culture, Oldenburg believes it is a reason Americans increasingly remained single through their twenties.⁸⁹ *Seinfeld* and *Friends* suggest a different order of cause and effect. Surely, people need intimate relationships at least as

⁸⁶ Oldenburg, 117.

⁸⁷ Bruce Katz and Robert Lang, *Redefining Urban and Suburban America: Evidence From Census 2000*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 64-71.

⁸⁸ Oldenburg's assumption that companionate marriage arose in the early 20th century is, though widely accepted among 20th century historians, disputed by scholars of earlier periods. "The general (albeit contested) consensus among historians of early modern courtship and marriage is that the 'companionate marriage' had been established as a dominant ideology much earlier, widely adopted by at least 1830, but well under way in the eighteenth century." Kate Fisher, "Marriage and Companionate Ideals since 1750," in *The Routledge History of Sex and the Body: 1500 to the Present*, ed. Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 329-348. See also, Mark Ingram, "Courtship and Marriage, c. 1500-1750," in *The Routledge History of Sex and the Body: 1500 to the Present*, ed. Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 313-327.

⁸⁹ Oldenburg, 246-248.

much as they need the informal relationships Oldenburg describes. Both shows are set in New York City, at the very moment when the city was becoming a safer place to live.⁹⁰ And yet, outside of their consistently futile romantic pursuits, these television characters spent their time with each other while they avoided other informal relationships. Having yet to find a partner for marriage, and having outgrown the intimate benefits of their relationships with their parents, the characters on *Seinfeld* and *Friends* relied on friendships as the most reliable and intimate relationships of their pre-marriage lives.

The close friendships depicted on *Seinfeld* and *Friends* may have been a result of the extended period of pre-marriage adulthood that arose in America at the end of the 20th century for a variety of cultural, social, and economic reasons.⁹¹ It would be unfair to characterize all groups of young, single friends in their 20s and 30s, in the 1990s up to today, as equally self-possessed and uninterested in civic engagement. Nevertheless, when it comes to community participation, Oldenburg and other cultural critics have declared America to be in some degree of crisis for several decades. The two most popular sitcoms of the nineties expressed ambivalent attitudes regarding community. To their tens of millions of weekly viewers, the shows emphasized both the therapeutic benefits of individual achievement in one's career and sex life, as well as a general indifference towards more virtuous, community-oriented activities.

Christopher Lasch, always interested in ways of reversing America's slide away from a healthy civic life, seizes on Oldenburg's argument in "Conversation and the Civic Arts," a chapter in *The Revolt of the Elites*. While Oldenburg touches on the political ramifications of a

⁹⁰ For example, Blaine Harden and Jill Dutt, "Manhattan Floats on Tide of Money and Migration; Ebbing Crime Rate Energizes Population Series," *The Washington Post*, May 25, 1997, A1-2. Chapters two and three will further discuss crime's decline in both New York City and America as a whole.

⁹¹ From 1970 to 1990, the median age of first marriage rose from 24 to 26 and a half for men, and from 22 to 25 for women. In 1999, 34% of the population between the ages of 25 and 34 were single. Jeffrey Scott Turner, *Families in America* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 7.

vibrant “third place,” Lasch eagerly imagines the benefits such places would have on the American community. Most importantly, in providing a democratized space for Americans to interact regularly with people of different ages, races, and cultures, “third spaces” foster the kind of conversation and debate necessary for a healthy democracy.⁹² However, no such benefit to civic life is observable in *Seinfeld* or *Friends*. Conversation amongst the friends-as-group-therapy focuses not on matters of national or even local importance, but instead on personal fears and discomfort.

The production realities of scripted television series, especially half-hour sitcoms, have made small, self-contained groups of characters an inherent part of primetime television throughout its history. However, sitcoms in the nineties, led by the immensely popular *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, depicted a more deliberate detachment from community than ever before. *Cheers* was long gone.

Jerry, Elaine, Kramer, and George...Rachel, Ross, Monica, Chandler, Phoebe, and Joey...all of these characters took for granted that self-gratification was the most important motivation in life. The difference in the essential nature of each show determined the differences in each show’s tone and each group’s fate. *Friends* was one long romantic comedy. *Seinfeld* was a social satire. *Friends* celebrated the meaningful relationships that made life most gratifying for the self; their intimate friendships sustained them as they sought a happy romantic coupling that would come for most of the group at the end of the series. *Seinfeld*’s characters never learned their lesson, but their fate suggested an ideological message that their therapeutic worldview was ultimately meaningless. It would fall to the decade’s other great televised social satire, *The*

⁹² Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 122-123.

Simpsons, to balance out the despair of *Seinfeld* with a vision of hope for individuals, families, friends, and communities. That is a story for a later chapter.

* * *

Ironically, throughout *Seinfeld*'s run, the real Jerry Seinfeld did not care for coffee. Though there was coffee in his cup on the Monk's set, he sipped it without enjoyment. That all changed when, as a husband and father, he began to appreciate some of the "third place" benefits of meeting a friend at a coffee shop. "My entire day was not free for social interaction," explains Seinfeld. "And eating is annoying and difficult to arrange...hard to choose places. And meeting someone for coffee suddenly seemed like a wonderful, compact, accessible and portable social interaction... You don't even really need a place. But you feel like you're doing something. That is what coffee is. And that is one of the geniuses of the new coffee culture."⁹³

Out of this newfound appreciation of coffee with friends came one of the most successful web series of the second, gradually more "professional" decade of internet video. *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* (2012-present) takes a typical celebrity talk show and sets it first in one of Seinfeld's seemingly endless collection of antique, luxury, and sports cars before moving to a coffee shop setting ranging from Monk's to Central Perk.⁹⁴ Seinfeld's friendly demeanor seems to disarm and engage his guests, and the result is a happy, intimate, and seemingly more candid conversation than the typical celebrity interview segments found on morning or late night programs. The programs are obviously edited; the audience does not see the entire journey in the car or the entire time at the coffee shop. The final product presents only the funniest and most

⁹³ "So Jerry Seinfeld Called Us to Talk about Coffee," *Morning Edition*, NPR, April 26, 2013, accessed July 15, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/04/26/179049781/so-jerry-seinfeld-called-us-to-talk-about-coffee>

⁹⁴ The whole series is available at comediansincarsgettingcoffee.com. As of summer 2015 there are 48 episodes of the series, each about 10-20 minutes long.

interesting parts of the dialogue. Most of his guests are comedians, and much of their conversation is spent in witty banter, though it occasionally ventures into more personal material. Mainly, the conversation is the sort of light-hearted, non-stressful give-and-take that Oldenburg celebrates as a benefit of the “third place.”

But, of course, the similarities to what Oldenburg has in mind end there. Jerry never brings his guests to the same place every time, and they never engage with the people around them. Quite often, others in the restaurant can be spotted looking at the celebrities with interest and delight, but their engagement is more of the awestruck voyeuristic sort. Ultimately, this is a show about two close friends (or, more usually and accurately, two celebrities who are *ostensibly* close friends) enjoying the pleasure of each other’s company and conversation.

The whole production delivers a uniquely refreshing experience to members of its audience, who get to be a silent participant in the conversation through their laptops, tablets, or phones. In part, this comes from the show’s aforementioned differences from typical celebrity interviews. More importantly, such face to face conversations are themselves threatened by the very technology that delivers *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* to its audience. In a way, Seinfeld is teaching his audience how they can retain face-to-face relationships in an increasingly digitized world. Each episode begins with him placing a phone call (not a text message or an email) to his guest to set up the time he will pick them up for coffee. In the first episode of the series, Seinfeld calls up his old partner, Larry David, while the video shows him driving in an old, blue Volkswagen bug.⁹⁵ The phone rings once before David answers:

LARRY DAVID: This is Larry David.

JERRY SEINFELD: Hey man.

DAVID: Hey!

⁹⁵ “Larry Eats a Pancake,” *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, season one, episode one (July 19, 2012).

SEINFELD: Wanna do something?

DAVID: Absolutely!

SEINFELD: Really? You free?

DAVID: Uhhhh...yeah, I could be free.

SEINFELD: Wanna grab a quick coffee?

DAVID: I'll get a coffee.

Surely, this part of the conversation is staged; there is an episode to shoot, after all, and the exchange feels slightly stilted. Nevertheless, this interaction is an essential piece of each episode. Making a date to see an old friend is a simple process, *Seinfeld* suggests to his audience. He picks David up, and their time together unfolds smoothly from there. It is that easy.

In these early decades of the 21st century, the face-to-face conversation is becoming increasingly less necessary and thus it occurs more infrequently. The dynamics of the friendships between the characters in *Seinfeld* and *Friends* seem nearly as quaint as the “third place.” How many Americans have a public place where they go regularly to be with a few close friends who are neither coworkers nor family? As Oldenburg observed a quarter century ago, such friendships are usually sustained either at appointed gatherings in a private home or pre-arranged meetings in a public space. Now, the aesthetics of *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* suggests even the latter behavior may be in danger. As Howard Schultz himself knows, the vast majority of coffee shop customers are individuals, grabbing their drink to go, or perhaps claiming a solitary seat to work alone. The time may come when Americans yearn for even the “anti-third place” experiences in the coffee shops that facilitated the intimate communities on *Friends* and *Seinfeld*.

Chapter 2

NYPD Blue's Detective Sipowicz and the Limits of the Individualist American Hero

I'm doing this my own way!
—Sipowicz¹

In 1990, primetime television seemed on the cusp of a great leap forward in artistically daring content. Debuting April 8, 1990, ABC's intriguing new show *Twin Peaks*, received a great deal of attention from critics and journalists. The show was in keeping with the dreamy, often bizarre work of its co-creator, filmmaker David Lynch. *Twin Peaks* followed an idiosyncratic FBI Agent's investigation into the violent, surreal, and supernatural circumstances surrounding the murder of a young woman in the titular small Washington town. The mystery was immediately gripping, and the weirdness of the show was strangely appealing, but eventually the show's style proved too much for a primetime network audience. With ratings plummeting, the show was canceled after its second season.²

One of many favorable reviews describes *Twin Peaks* as “at the intersection of soap opera, detective show and David Lynch movie. Built on a bedrock of common genre conventions, the series also inverts and exaggerates standard TV formulas, cleverly distorting them into something as mysterious as it is oddly recognizable.”³ Just as the dense, literate *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-87) had pushed television up a new level of quality in the eighties, *Twin Peaks* began to expand the medium's creative potential even further. Its failure seemed to

¹ “Guns ‘n Rosaries,” *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season one, episode 21 (ABC, May 10, 1994).

² Tom Shales, “The Sun Sets on ‘Twin Peaks,’” *Washington Post*, February 18, 1991, C1.

³ Jim Emerson, “Another World: The Strangely Familiar Territory of *Twin Peaks* is at the Intersection of Soap Opera, Mystery and David Lynch,” *Sun Sentinel*, May 12, 1990, 1D.

dampen the willingness of the big three networks to invest in artistically experimental programming throughout the decade.

Primetime programming in the nineties, thus, remained safely within traditional genre categories. Half-hour sitcoms flourished. Hour-long dramas set in the usual plot-producing settings—police stations, hospitals, and courtrooms—did too. The networks rarely invested in shows that pushed or bent traditional generic expectations, with two important exceptions discussed in chapter four. Nor did they gamble on other older, once-predominant genres that had vanished from the primetime schedule. There were no primetime game shows until ABC stumbled into the phenomenon of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* in the summer of 1999. Variety shows, ubiquitous through television's first three decades, were nowhere to be found on the network television schedule other than their distant relatives, the late night talk shows, and NBC's sketch comedy staple, *Saturday Night Live*. And, in the decade that began with the little-remarked centennial of the closing of the American frontier, Westerns were completely absent.

Westerns had briefly ruled network programming. In the 1958-59 television season, the genre made up seven of the top ten rated programs.⁴ The high-water mark of the TV Western came just after the quiz show scandals of 1958 and amidst the steady popularity of suburban family sitcoms that continued into the early sixties. Cop shows, on the other hand, were much less dominant in the 1950s. Police dramas only became more successful in the 1970s at the very moment when Westerns had all but disappeared from American primetime television. Both genres deal with the ongoing project of imposing American order, either on the uncivilized western frontier or in the lawless city streets. In the early 21st century, cable's ascendance and the

⁴ They were, in descending order, *Gunsmoke* (CBS, 1955-75), *Wagon Train* (NBC, 1957-62; ABC, 1962-65), *Have Gun—Will Travel* (CBS, 1957-63), *The Rifleman* (ABC, 1958-63), *Maverick* (ABC, 1957-62), *Tales of Wells Fargo* (NBC, 1957-62), and *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* (ABC, 1955-61). Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows: 1946-present*, 9th edition (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), 1682.

ensuing fragmentation of the audience created an opportunity for Westerns to return to American television. But from the 1970s to the end of the century, police dramas far outnumbered Westerns on network primetime.

“The TV Western is dead,” J. Fred MacDonald declares in his 1987 book, *Who Shot the Sheriff? The Rise and Fall of the Television Western*. He argues that by the end of the 1960s the Western ceased “to relate significantly to the values, fantasies, aspirations, anxieties, self-conceptualizations and other prevailing attitudes shared by the audience/customers.”⁵ In the shifting American context, cop shows could illustrate these cultural attitudes much more effectively. By the 1970s, America’s crime rate was well into its long, steady rise to the early 1990s.⁶ The erosion of the American city, a consequence of suburbanization and deindustrialization, was well underway. And, after Vietnam and Watergate, Americans’ faith in their government was also tumbling.

The American police drama takes the myth of the American West—the imposition of order on the wild—and brings it into a late 20th century, gritty, urban setting.⁷ In the basic Western formula, the hero triumphs over evil and chaos through the force of his own individualist principles, just as America triumphed over its frontier through American

⁵ J. Fred MacDonald, *Who Shot the Sheriff?: The Rise and Fall of the Television Western* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 88. In television, film, and literature the Western is far from gone, but it remains a far less popular genre in America than it was in the mid-19th century. For more on the decline of western films see Michael Aggresta, “How the Western Was Lost (and Why it Matters),” *The Atlantic*, July 24, 2013. For a brief discussion of the decline of western literature by the turn of the century, see John Jakes, ed., *A Century of Great Western Stories* (New York: Forge, 2000), 13-14.

⁶ Steven D. Levitt, “Understanding Why Crime Fell in the 1990s: Four Factors that Explain the Decline and Six that Do Not,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Winter 2004), 163-190.

⁷ Robert J. Thompson has argued, “The mob story...replaced the Western as the great American epic in the last third of the 20th century. ... [*The Godfather* films] retold the American epic on the urban frontier.” See Robert J. Thompson, “Mob Hit: The Boss of Comedy?” *Washington Post*, March 12, 2006). Thompson is discussing the epic qualities of both *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*, noting their incorporation of the American myth of individualist pursuit of economic and familial success. In this chapter, I am making a slightly different comparison between the individualist personality qualities celebrated in both the heroes of the Western and the heroes of the cop show. In short, I think we are both correct.

individualism. That individualism is still present in the heroes of television police dramas from the dogged stoicism of Joe Friday on *Dragnet* (originally NBC, 1951-59) to the reckless radicalism of Jimmy McNulty on *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-08). However, while the hero in the Western is by necessity the solitary embodiment of the law, the hero in the police drama is merely a cog in the institution, a fact that inherently threatens his individualism. The institutional rules imposed from above via the archetypal “by-the-book” boss impede the hero’s ability to use his greatest asset—his individualism—in service of crime prosecution and prevention. The justice system is an obstacle the hero cop must navigate in order to enforce justice most effectively.

N.Y.P.D. Blue explores this contradiction. It neither celebrates the law enforcement system nor glorifies the individualist cop. Indeed, true individualism, *N.Y.P.D. Blue* suggests, is self-destructive when taken to its full extent. In *N.Y.P.D. Blue* heroes are imperfect characters, and their imperfections could overwhelm them if they do not receive help from others. Ultimately, the characters must rely on the familial bonds that form in an office of decent, well-meaning cops.

As the cops on *N.Y.P.D. Blue* encounter violence and stress on the job, it strains and often breaks their relationships with their families at home. Thus, not only does the office family help the individualist hero manage his imperfections in order to become a better cop, his professional associates also serve as a surrogate family to replace the real family shattered by his work. Dramatic personal transformation is made possible not via a strong individualist effort from within nor via strict supervision from the institution above but through the patient, stern, yet loving attention of the professional family. Thus, Detective Andy Sipowicz, a racist, bigoted,

alcoholic, can mend his ways to the benefit of himself, his friends and family, and the entire city he serves.

N.Y.P.D. Blue: Origins and Controversies

ABC's longest running hour-long primetime drama debuted September 21, 1993. *N.Y.P.D. Blue* told the story of the detectives working in Manhattan's 15th precinct. Sipowicz, played to critical acclaim by Dennis Franz (four Emmy wins and eight nominations), is an alcoholic and a bigot who, from time to time, physically assaults suspects, often black or Hispanic, in his personal pursuit of justice. Despite his admirable passion and righteousness, Sipowicz is an unpleasant man. He sneers at black community leaders who confront his biases. He refers to the office's homosexual administrative aide as "Gay John." And he is generally impatient with just about everyone. His balding, greying head and rotund body further emphasize his imperfections, especially seen in relation to his handsome young partners. In a long line of lovable curmudgeons on primetime television, Sipowicz is heavy on the curmudgeon. This prickly man would be the defining character of the show, and the only one to appear in every episode of *N.Y.P.D. Blue*'s 12-year-run.

The show was not initially constructed around him. In the first season, much of the action was seen through the eyes of Sipowicz's younger partner, Detective John Kelly, played by David Caruso, a more conventionally attractive leading man. Notoriously, Caruso left the show early in the second season, and Sipowicz began making his way through a string of young, handsome partners even as the show's writers increasingly realized his character was the heart and engine of the show. Sipowicz's second partner, Bobby Simone, was played by Jimmy Smits, fresh off a long, star-making run on the legal drama, *L.A. Law* (NBC, 1986-94). Sipowicz's symbolic shift to *N.Y.P.D. Blue*'s center stage came early in the second season, two episodes after Smits joined

the cast. As Simone settled into his new role, Sipowicz was trying to overcome his nervousness about moving in with his girlfriend and future wife, Assistant District Attorney Sylvia Costas. She suggests he take a shower to relax, and then joins him in the stall. Her thorough “soaping” prompts Sipowicz to quip, “Boy, that’s sure gonna be clean.”⁸ Franz thus joined several of his colleagues on the show who performed nude on network television.

N.Y.P.D. Blue’s nudity got a lot of attention months before the show debuted, as did its strong language and graphic violence. The spring before the show’s fall debut, as networks do with all new shows, ABC screened a few episodes of the new series to advertisers and critics. News of the show’s graphic content quickly spread, stirring up concern among several television watchdog groups.⁹ In public, ABC adapted a serious stance, emphasizing the careful negotiation the network had gone through with the show’s co-creators, Steven Bochco and David Milch.¹⁰ In private, executives must have been pleased with the publicity the show was getting before its launch and delighted when the show was an immediate hit. The pilot episode won its time slot with a 15.9 rating (about 15 million households tuned in) and a 27 share (the percentage of TVs in use that tuned to the show).¹¹ Plus, the long public debate over the show forewarned ABC’s audience for *N.Y.P.D. Blue*’s content when it did air. Still, 57 of ABC’s 225 affiliates refused to air the September 1993 pilot episode, which includes a 40-second sex scene with Kelly and fellow cop Janice Licalsi (Amy Brenneman) as well as a heated exchange between Sipowicz and then-nemesis A.D.A. Costas that concludes with the detective grabbing his crotch and calling her

⁸ “Final Adjustment,” *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season two, episode six (ABC, November 22, 1994).

⁹ Mark Gunther, “Bochco Getting Some Heat for Controversial Cop Show, ‘NYPD Blue,’” *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 29, 1993, B7.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Kolbert, “What’s a Network TV Censor to Do?” *New York Times*, May 23, 1993.

¹¹ Stuart Elliot, “Controversy may sell, but only a few marketers took a chance with ‘N.Y.P.D. Blue,’” *New York Times*, September 23, 1993, D19.

a “pissy little bitch.” Later in the episode, the mafia thug Sipowicz is investigating guns down the detective in a wild scene of bullets and blood.¹²

The complaints about *N.Y.P.D. Blue*’s contents focused on the explicit sex scenes, the bloody violence, and the coarse language. Coverage of the controversy discussed the decisions of affiliates to pre-empt the pilot, as well as the hesitancy of many companies to buy ad time during the show. Perhaps because Sipowicz was not yet the center of the series, none of the complainers took issue with his despicable nature; it was the content of his language, not his character that bothered some Americans.

Andy Sipowicz, Hero

N.Y.P.D. Blue’s Andy Sipowicz is frequently described as an early version of the male antihero archetype which predominated television’s most recent Golden Age.¹³ In fact, *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *The Shield* (FX, 2002-08), *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), and other anti-hero shows align more closely with the ideology of *Seinfeld*, whose characters are ultimately incapable of self-improvement, than they do with *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, which traces a troubled, terrible man’s gradual yet thorough redemption.¹⁴

¹² “Pilot,” *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season one, episode one (ABC, September 21, 1993). My home town ABC affiliate, WIXT in Syracuse, NY, was one of the stations that boycotted the pilot episode. Over the summer, the station invited local groups in to watch the first episode. The response of some members of that audience along with the calls and letters from other Central New Yorkers prompted the station manager to decide to pre-empt the series. WIXT skipped the second episode, too, although that did not stop my mother from becoming a series-long viewer of the show. William La Rue, “‘NYPD Blue’ is too Blue for Syracuse, Says WIXT—Instead, Channel 9 Gives a 10-4 to ‘Real Stories from the Highway Patrol,’” *Post-Standard*, September 14, 1993, A1.

¹³ For example, Brett Martin, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution, from The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013) describes Sipowicz as “an early version of TV’s difficult man” (86) and the character “heralded...the generation of complicated antiheroes” (175).

¹⁴ Franz had played two similarly flawed policemen before on *Hill Street Blues*. Detective Sal Benedetto, appearing in five episodes in 1983, was a nasty, utterly corrupt policeman. Lieutenant Norman Buntz, a regular in the show’s final two seasons, was equally mean, though he channeled his ferocity in service of the job and against law-breakers, at least as he saw it. Through these three characters, then, Franz has traces a complete redemption.

While the racist, alcoholic Detective Sipowicz is a memorably complex protagonist, it is a mistake to explain him in relation to the characters that followed him. Sipowicz is best understood in terms of how he relates to other characters within the police drama genre as well as the historical context in which he was created. Though *N.Y.P.D. Blue* examines his personal flaws with more seriousness than previous cop shows, Sipowicz is cut from the same cloth as tough-talking, street-smart individualist cops and detectives before him and noble, quick-drawing, individualist sheriffs before them.

However, his link to such mythic American male heroes is complicated by his very modern problems. His ex-wife is also an alcoholic. His father was bitterly racist. He is estranged from his son. And he is scarred from his experience in Vietnam. Sipowicz himself is something of an artifact from another age when his bigotries would have been common place within a predominantly white police force as well as the American culture overall. One of the things that makes Sipowicz a sympathetic character in the show's early seasons is that he is at least partially conscious of his flaws and, starting with his alcoholism, determined to fix himself.

N.Y.P.D. Blue's more serious preoccupation with its protagonist's flaws relates to a larger theme of nineties television, and late 20th century American culture in general. Just as *Seinfeld* delved into the neuroses of its characters, *N.Y.P.D. Blue* grappled more closely with Sipowicz's crisis of the self than it did with New York City's crisis of community. Broadly, *N.Y.P.D. Blue* was relatively less concerned with urban decay than its closely related predecessor, *Hill Street Blues*. Bochco co-created *Hill Street Blues* and Milch wrote for it, helping craft a show that emphasized the efforts of talented police heroes to fight crime in a decaying urban environment within a police system that was itself also decaying. In the 1990s the national crime rate reversed for the first time in decades and America's cities, particularly New York, were seemingly on the

mend.¹⁵ Of course, there was still an endless string of violent crimes for Sipowicz and his fellow detectives in the 15th squad to solve every week. Also, it is too simple to say America's decline in crime directly influenced *N.Y.P.D. Blue*'s focus on its characters' internal lives. As *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and other examples of nineties television demonstrate, such an internal focus is a common characteristic of popular culture in America's therapeutic age—a culture that emphasizes individual healing and fulfillment over community building and repair. Still, as crime was becoming less of a national community problem, its decline created space for a show like *N.Y.P.D. Blue* to explore the personal problems of its characters. Sipowicz's personal struggles made *N.Y.P.D. Blue* more representative of America's therapeutic culture than most previous cop shows.

However, belying the preferred method of an entire age of self-help culture, Sipowicz cannot improve by himself. His community of colleagues must intervene to help him along. Even as he is repeatedly beset by personal tragedy, Sipowicz's transformation is nourished and guided by his fellow detectives in the 15th squad. The goodness of the bunch makes the bad apple better.

N.Y.P.D. Blue's celebration of the police department-as-family anticipates the national apotheosis of the Big Apple's firefighters and police officers in the aftermath of 9/11. However, the show began during a nadir in the nation's perception of police, even after the national crime rate began to dip. In constructing a world around a racist detective, the show engages with American law enforcement's greatest weakness, a flaw that had loomed all too recently in the American television audience's memory when the show debuted. Sipowicz's personal problems are not his alone; he is a sad embodiment of the worst of America's entire police force. In the furor over the show's graphic content, no one seemed preoccupied with the misogynist and racist

¹⁵ Levitt, 2004.

sentiment motivating Sipowicz's language. No one noticed the disturbing parallels between the physical intimidation that went on in the fictional precinct's interrogation room and the white cop-on-black-citizen violence that America had just witnessed.

Two and a half years before the debut of *N.Y.P.D. Blue* a man with a camcorder captured one of America's most infamous cop dramas. Only nine minutes long, it rocked Los Angeles for over a year, and brought America's attention to the problems of police brutality and racism.

Bad Cops

The sirens of several police cars approaching may not have roused George Holliday out of bed, but their failure to pass by and recede into the early hours brought him to his feet to look outside.¹⁶ By the flicker and glow of a growing gathering of Los Angeles Police Department vehicles, several of his neighbors were already watching the unfolding scene from various balconies of the Lake View Terrace apartment complex. Holliday saw a white car surrounded by police cars. He saw a black man spread-eagled on the hood of the car.

Holliday grabbed his palm-held camcorder, a Sony 8mm Handycam with a zoom lens. The camera was two-weeks old, fresh out of the box. It was one of the more popular brands of the new wave of portable personal video recorders that had replaced the bulkier, shoulder-top models of the 1980s.¹⁷ Holliday was eager to put his new purchase to use.¹⁸ It was 12:52 AM,

¹⁶ Reuters, "Camera Operator Takes Stand in Trial: Man Tells of Taping Rodney King Beating," *Sun Sentinel*, March 2, 1993, 3A.

¹⁷ Michael Goldstein, "The Other Beating," *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 2006, accessed Aug. 25, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/la-tm-holidayfeb19-story.html>. As Goldstein's profile explains, Holliday would not make much of a profit from the film, and he remained in the plumbing business when this story ran.

¹⁸ Reuters, 3A.

March 3, 1991; the camcorder automatically marked the date and time in the lower right corner of the video.¹⁹ Holliday pressed record.

Holliday captured eight minutes of footage which he sold to local television station KTLA for \$500, the only money he received for the original tape. The video quickly made its way to various national news outlets, including CNN, the 24-hour cable news network which had recently achieved its highest viewership totals to date during its coverage of the Persian Gulf War (August 1990-February 1991).²⁰ CNN played the tape over and over, through the ensuing trial, and through the Los Angeles riots a little over a year later. The footage is relentless, but worth describing at length because of its cultural resonance from the moment Holliday sold the tape. His late night citizen journalism would become one of the most watched videos ever—the beating of Rodney King.²¹

* * *

The video picks up the action after King’s two passengers had already been arrested. King, acting erratically, has finally exited the car. In the first seconds of the video, he gets to his feet after twice being hit by a Taser gun. Immediately, he stands up and bolts a few steps, moving left to right from Holliday’s perspective. One officer, Laurence Powell, swings his baton like a baseball bat, dropping King right back to the ground. The next ten seconds are out of focus, making it difficult to tell exactly what is happening, although Powell seems to be striking

¹⁹ “Rodney King Video,” March 3, 1991, accessed Sep. 2, 2015, <https://vault.fbi.gov/rodney-king/video/rodney-king-video>.

²⁰ Brian Donlon, “Gulf News Puts Prime-Time Ratings in Flux; Crisis Boosts CNN Viewership,” *USA TODAY*, January 22, 1991, 3D.

²¹ “Rodney King Video.”

King repeatedly.²² When the image clears, King is still on the ground. Powell raises his baton to strike King, but another cop, Officer Theodore Briseno, holds his hand up and stops the beating for a moment. King, though, rises to his knees, and Powell immediately whacks him in the chest. From the left, Officer Timothy Wind hits King in the buttocks with his nightstick. All the while, Sergeant Stacey Koon, the commanding officer at the scene, stands nearby holding his fired Taser gun. The Taser's cables, occasionally visible in the video, are still connected to King, and Coon occasionally waves the gun to manipulate the cables out of the way of the melee. Holliday's camera shakes for a moment. King rolls over once but does not stay down. The beating continues.

King, writhing, gets back to his knees. Once again looking like a baseball player, Powell swings at King's left shoulder four times.

King is now trying to crawl away from Powell, but he heads straight towards Wind. A direct hit on the lower back from Powell sends King sprawling face-first onto the asphalt. Wind swings at King's upper body as he goes down, adding another blow to keep King down.

Now Powell looks like he is wielding a pickaxe on hard soil. The rhythm of his attack is broken up only by a couple strikes from Wind. One... two... three... four... five... six... seven... before Powell takes a momentary pause.

King is on his stomach. He has managed to crawl and writhe his way the length of his car. His head is now near the bumper. With great effort, he shimmies towards the side of the

²² KTLA cut the first 10-15 seconds of the video to remove this blurry portion, thus also cutting the image of King starting to run. While this edit may have made King appear more helpless, and the first 10 seconds of the video were important in the initial acquittal of the officers because it showed King apparently trying to escape, the entire footage circulated throughout the national media in various forms over the ensuing year. Steve Meyers, "How citizen journalism has changed since George Holliday's Rodney King video," Poynter Institute, March 3, 2011, accessed September 2, 2015, <http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/121687/how-citizen-journalism-has-changed-since-george-hollidays-rodney-king-video/>.

road. Powell hits him in the back of the leg, and then waits a moment to judge the effects. King is still moving.

One... two... three beats from Powell to King's ankle, accompanied by one... two beats from Wind, hacking at King from a sharp angle, swinging more like a golfer than Powell's baseball player.

King continues his agonizing journey from right to left on the frame, inching away from Powell and Wind. He rolls onto his back, and then completes the revolution, returning to his stomach. Powell raises his night stick, hesitates, and then hacks at King's ankle again. Holliday, as if twitching, zooms out for a moment then zooms back in. In the meantime, Powell has struck King's ankle again.

The beating pauses. The cops look like they are yelling instructions at King, but the camera is too far away to pick up what they are saying. Koon gestures angrily at King, perhaps demanding he stay down. Briseno, lurking around King throughout, now gives King a swift stomp on the shoulder with the heel of his shoe. King continues to flail. Surrounded by assailants, his shimmying is now directionless.

Briseno backs away nervously, giving Powell and Wind an opening to get in one more blow apiece.

Incredibly, King's torso rises and he gets to his hands and knees. Powell hits him on the back once. Wind gets two strikes in, but King keeps rising. He gets his head up and raises his left arm. Powell's nightstick whacks the arm twice. Wind's foot connects with the back of King's neck three times.

The camera zooms out. Abruptly, surreally, a civilian car rolls by slowly, rubber-necking the last moments of one of the most notorious scenes in the history of American law enforcement.

Again, one whack on the back from Powell is followed by three kicks in the upper back from Wind.

Holliday's camera hand shudders. King, sitting up, raises his hands to his head. Briseno moves in to handcuff him. King disappears into a circle of uniformed men.

Holliday catches a full minute and a half of the beating before King is finally handcuffed. King never loses consciousness as far as the camera is able to see, and he only stops writhing once he is firmly hogtied, handcuffs around his feet as well as his hands, and dumped on his knees on the side of the road.

* * *

This was a logical end point for most televised replays of Holliday's video, but the original tape lasts nine minutes. The rest of the footage shows the police officers pacing around the scene, occupying themselves with various activities, wrapping things up at the scene. At one point, Holliday's camera finds one of King's passengers led to the front of a police car. With relative gentleness, he is pressed to the hood, perhaps to be frisked. Then, his hands cuffed behind him, he is led to another car and placed in the back seat. Some of the cop cars leave. A coach bus slowly rolls by from right to left, as though it had been stopped just off the camera, impatiently waiting for events to conclude so its passengers could continue on to wherever they were headed.

The footage has sound, but there is not much to hear. Police helicopters are often audible but out of frame in the night sky. When the choppers range far enough away, the sounds of

police cars and other traffic can be heard. The camera is too far away to pick up whatever King or the police officers are saying, but it does catch the voices of Holliday's neighbors, commenting with shock and disgust at what they are witnessing. Holliday himself talks only a few times, speaking in Spanish, presumably to his wife (both are Argentinean). As the action dies down, one particularly vocal neighbor can be overheard recounting what all the onlookers had just witnessed. "They got 50 of them after one man! It's sick. ...One of them walked up behind him and just knocked him out. ...blood all over there." Mostly, the footage is remarkably quiet. After a century of sound effects in radio shows, films, and television programs depicting punches and kicks of all sorts, the noiselessness of the real-life beating is jarring.

Compared to the 21st century's ever-increasing megapixels, Holliday's grainy footage creates an eerie yet symbolic anonymity. King and the officers would be identified later. The noise and lights from the overhead helicopter and the tangle of police cars reveal the overwhelming force the police exert at the scene. The main action is simple—four white male police officers brutally beat a black man. A dozen, perhaps two dozen other police officers also roam around the scene. They are apparently all white, and most of them are male.²³ King and his passengers are the only black people visible in the scene. There is no context, no explanation of how King and a pack of cops ended up there. The Sony Handycam captures some colors, like the flashing lights of the cop cars, but in the dark night, the colors, like the faces, are muted; the image is essentially black and white.

A year later, a jury acquitted Powell, Wind, Koon, and Briseno of charges of excessive force. Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley condemned the decision, citing Holliday's video. "The

²³ In fact, a California Highway Patrolwoman and her partner and husband first spotted King driving at high speeds that night. Officers Melanie and Timothy Singer began the 7-8 mile pursuit that ended in the beating after LAPD Sergeant Koon took over command of the scene. Lynne Shifflett, "The King Beating Trial: Unwitting Champions of Change," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 18, 1992, A1.

jury's verdict will never blind us to what we saw on that videotape. The men who beat Rodney King do not deserve to wear the uniform of the L.A.P.D."²⁴ President George H.W. Bush, addressing the nation, said, "Viewed from outside the trial, it was hard to understand how the verdict could possibly square with the video. Those civil rights leaders with whom I met were stunned. And so was I, and so was Barbara, and so were my kids."²⁵ Bill Clinton, at that moment the presumptive Democratic nominee, spoke out on the incompatibility of the jury's decision and the Holliday video. "Like most of America I saw the tape of the beatings several times," he said, "and it certainly looks excessive to me so I don't understand the verdict."²⁶

Fifty-three people died in the ensuing riots in South Central Los Angeles, which lasted from April 29-May 4, 1992. That was the highest death toll for a domestic disturbance in the 20th century. The King beating and the riots marked a low point for racial progress in general and law enforcement's reputation in particular. Who were these brutal men whose behavior Holliday had captured? Were they anomalies or were they representative of typical flaws in America's cops?

Bad Boys

There just so happened to be a lull in the number of traditional police dramas on television when the King beating and riots occurred, a few years before *N.Y.P.D. Blue*'s debut. Perhaps network executives felt the genre had reached a point of fatigue. *T.J. Hooker* (ABC, 1982-85; CBS, 1985-86), *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS, 1981-88), *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984-89), and *Hunter* (NBC, 1984-91) were among the cop shows that had recently concluded. Private detective shows like *Magnum, P.I.* (CBS, 1980-88), *Remington Steele* (NBC, 1982-87), and

²⁴ Seth Mydans, "The Police Verdict; Los Angeles Policemen Acquitted in Taped Beating," *New York Times*, April 30, 1992.

²⁵ George Bush, "Address to the Nation on the Civil Disturbances in Los Angeles, California," May 1, 1992, accessed September 4, 2015, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=20910>.

²⁶ Mydans.

Moonlighting (ABC, 1985-89) also came to an end before the turn of the decade. The only cop show to bridge this gap with several years in the top 25 of the ratings was *In the Heat of the Night* (NBC, 1988-92; CBS, 1992-94). NBC's *Law & Order* launched in 1990, though its cultural influence would build slowly over its first few seasons (and its historical significance will be discussed in the next chapter).

Into this relative absence of shows about fictional crime-fighters came several programs using reenactments and/or real-life footage of cops and other public servants on the job. *Rescue 911* (CBS, 1989-96) combined real 911 emergency calls and reenactments to tell dramatic rescue stories. *Unsolved Mysteries* (NBC, 1987-97; CBS, 97-99) showed dramatized versions of all kinds of mysterious events, narrated mainly through interviews with real people.²⁷ *America's Most Wanted* (Fox, 1988-2012) was perhaps the most newsworthy of these crime and mystery "docudramas," if not initially the best-rated. The show told stories of still-at-large fugitives. Remarkably, four days after the series premiere, one of the profiled criminals was recognized and captured after two years on the run.²⁸ Fox paired *America's Most Wanted* with another docudrama show, *Cops* (Fox, 1989-2013; Spike TV, 2013-present). There are no reenactments or narrators on *Cops*. There is only the footage and sound captured by a camera crew accompanying police officers at work. The video is quite similar to the footage Holliday captured, except the police officers on *Cops*, cooperating as they are with the program, are always shown in a positive light, the good guys capturing the "Bad Boys," as the show's theme song labels the people being apprehended. The Rodney King video, captured two years after *Cops* debuted, played like an episode of that show gone horribly wrong.

²⁷ *Lifetime* network revived the series in 2001-02. *Spike* brought it back again in 2008-2010.

²⁸ Frank J. Prial, "Freeze! You're on TV," *New York Times Magazine*, September 25, 1988.

The year of the King beating, 1991, America's crime rate across the country started its abrupt and lasting decline in all categories from homicide to property crime.²⁹ When these docudramas first aired, though, they emphasized law enforcement's persistent efforts before statistics began to reveal a turnaround. Inherently, because these shows were made with the full cooperation of the police force, they consistently offered a pro-police point-of-view. *Law & Order*, dramatizing police procedure step by step, from crime to trial, promoted a similar ideology discussed in the following chapter.

N.Y.P.D. Blue on the other hand, went in a different direction. A fictional series, it could craft stories and characters with a depth and complexity that neither police-friendly docudramas nor amateur videographers could approach. On *N.Y.P.D. Blue* both the law enforcement system and its employees are effective though imperfect. Like the cops on *Cops*, its detectives always catch the bad guy. But unlike *Law & Order* or the legal docudramas, *N.Y.P.D. Blue* explored the deep flaws of its individual characters, including Sipowicz's racism. Unfolding its story of Andy Sipowicz over more than a decade, *N.Y.P.D. Blue* traced a path from the horror of the King beating to the effective law enforcement of *Cops*. Sipowicz's redemption over the course of the series demonstrates how even the most problematic police officers may be repaired for the benefit of all.

Fancy and Sipowicz

Sipowicz's relationship with his black boss, Lieutenant Arthur Fancy (James McDaniel), best epitomizes the gradual improvement of his character and the waning of his racism.³⁰ When

²⁹ Levitt, 2004.

³⁰ Jason P. Vest explores the Sipowicz-Fancy relationship closely in *The Wire, Deadwood, Homicide, and NYPD Blue: Violence is Power* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011). Vest's book employs thorough close readings of a number of important shows including *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, though I find myself somewhat at odds with his conclusion that the show "refuses to indict the legal system, the police

the series begins, Sipowicz, as Fancy tells him, has crawled “inside a bottle and set up housekeeping.”³¹ Sipowicz is trying to get sober, so Fancy pushes him to go to Alcoholics Anonymous. “I’m doing this my own way,” Sipowicz insists, but ultimately he cannot. By the end of the first season, after encouragement from Fancy, his new girlfriend A.D.A. Costas, and others in the precinct, Sipowicz begins attending AA meetings.³²

Two years later, Sipowicz relapses after his son from his first marriage, Andy Jr., just beginning a career as a New York police officer, is murdered on the job.³³ It is days after his second wife, Sylvia Costas, gives birth to their new son, Theo. The new mother, looking out for their infant, kicks the drunken Sipowicz out of their apartment. Fancy sends Sipowicz home from work when he shows up drunk.³⁴ His partner Simone tracks down Andy Jr.’s killers and shoots them both dead. (He is legally in the clear, as the suspects reach for their own guns when he confronts them.) Sipowicz sees the news on the bar’s television set, but gets into more trouble when, drunken and deluded, he picks a fight with a group of teens outside. They beat him badly and steal his gun. Simone and Fancy come to the rescue, tracking down the firearm and keeping Sipowicz’s mistakes under wraps, saving his job. The concerned support of his coworkers,

department, or the divided society that allows his [Sipowicz’s] racial animosities to develop. Sipowicz, as always, always, requires redemption; the criminal-justice system does not” (59). As I seek to demonstrate in this chapter, *N.Y.P.D. Blue* alludes to real life problems in America’s law enforcement throughout its run, problems with which most of its viewers would be familiar. The series thus reminds its audience of cops much worse than Sipowicz. The show is problematic in its implication that the American criminal-justice system’s redemption can come about in large part internally through the efforts of its own, mostly decent officers. As footnoted below, Vest cites many of the same examples I use. The differences in our conclusions come, I would suggest, in large part from a difference of goals, namely that I am relatively less preoccupied with the (valuable) question of what the show does not do and more interested in the ideas the show was producing for its audience. Examining the limits of the show’s engagement with racism, Vest convincingly concludes *N.Y.P.D. Blue* fails to achieve the authentic realism to which it seems to aspire. For an essay that influences Vest’s conclusion, see also Richard Clark Sterne, “*N.Y.P.D. Blue*,” in Robert M. Jarvis and Paul R. Joseph, *Prime Time Law: Fictional Television as Legal Narrative* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1998), 87-104.

³¹ “Brown Appetit,” *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season one, episode three (ABC, October 5, 1993).

³² “Guns ‘n Rosaries.”

³³ “A Death in the Family,” *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season three, episode 20 (ABC, May 7, 1996).

³⁴ “Closing Time,” *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season three, episode 21 (ABC, May 14, 1996).

including his wife, partner, and boss, combine to help bring Sipowicz back from the brink of self-destruction in time for Theo's baptism in the season finale.³⁵

Fancy occasionally intervenes to save Sipowicz's career, declining opportunities to report his missteps. The Lieutenant might have made his own job easier if he had rid his office of Sipowicz's persona, and he might have made his life easier if he had purged Sipowicz's racism from his life, but Fancy never cuts Sipowicz loose. Fancy is not sentimental; at several moments throughout their relationship, it seems the two men truly hate each other. Fancy's reasons for keeping Sipowicz around are, at least in part, those of a pragmatic realist who understands the white-dominated power structure for which he serves. "I'm not going to take you out, Andy," Fancy explains to his cantankerous detective who, earlier in that episode, had used the word "nigger." "I move you out, my white bosses, they send me a little message. They send me another one just like you, but maybe that one can't do the job like you can."³⁶ There are other institutional obstacles tying Fancy's hands with Sipowicz, from union power to bureaucratic rules. Indeed, the bureaucracy keeps the two men together long enough for them to reconcile with each other. However, Fancy is not merely a pragmatist. He genuinely cares about Sipowicz's well-being, though Fancy and Sipowicz clash several more times before their mutual respect and trust takes firm root.

Sipowicz's character transformation as well as his relationship with Fancy, both suffer a few setbacks. His old racial biases, like his addiction, still spark an occasional conflict years after Sipowicz begins to mend his ways. One of the most raucous conflicts between Sipowicz and

³⁵ "He's Not Guilty, He's My Brother," *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season three, episode 22 (ABC, May 21, 1996).

³⁶ "The Backboard Jungle," *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season three, episode 10 (ABC, January 16, 1996).

Fancy occurs in season six when they face off over the actions of another, younger cop who works in the precinct.

Officer Szymanski is a junior version of Sipowicz, at least in terms of his racial attitudes.³⁷ Both are white men of Polish descent. Both men have stories from their past that they use to explain and justify their prejudices, at least to themselves. Sipowicz grew up in a neighborhood that saw its racial makeup shift from white to black after his family moved in, and then his father, a meter reader, was brutally attacked by a black man who mistook him for a burglar. Early in his career, Sipowicz worked undercover infiltrating a radical, Black Panthers-like organization.³⁸ Szymanski was the victim of violence inflicted by black criminals; he and his wife were once jumped and robbed on the street by knife-wielding assailants.³⁹

Szymanski first appears in season four (1996-97). Fancy and his wife, both dressed up, are driving in the city after a night out. The sound and lights of a police siren interrupt their peaceful ride, and immediately Fancy and his wife remember their car's broken taillight. But when they stop, Szymanski points his gun at Fancy, shouting at the couple to exit the vehicle and put their hands on the hood of their car.⁴⁰

The scene occurred just as the American media was filling up with stories of racial profiling in real police traffic stops across the country.⁴¹ Szymanski's unkind treatment of Fancy

³⁷ Vest, 68.

³⁸ Sipowicz's background is mentioned every once in a while throughout the series. For example, see his long scene with Simone in "Where's 'Swaldo'", *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season four, episode four (ABC, November 12, 1996).

³⁹ "Raging Bulls," *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season six, episode eight (ABC, December 15, 1998).

⁴⁰ "Taillight's Last Gleaming," *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season four, episode 15 (ABC, February 18, 1997).

⁴¹ For example, Harriet Barovick, "DWB: Driving While Black," *Time*. June 15, 1998. The American Civil Liberties Union, which helped many black drivers sue police for racial profiling, published a special report on the topic: David A. Harris, "Driving while Black: Racial Profiling on our Nation's Highways," American Civil Liberties Union, June 1999, accessed September 30, 2015, <https://www.aclu.org/report/driving-while-black-racial-profiling-our-nations-highways>.

is particularly shocking; unlike the news reports of police racially profiling distant strangers, *N.Y.P.D. Blue*'s viewers know Fancy's personal qualities. Shocked and infuriated, Fancy tells the officers he is a cop. Szymanski, still pointing his gun, allows the lieutenant to take his shield out of his pocket. The situation is diffused, but not entirely. "You stopped us like you had my description on a bank robbery," Fancy complains, hinting at Szymanski's obvious profiling. Rather than apologize, Szymanski stands his ground, quoting the relevant traffic law on broken taillights, which only further annoys Fancy. Fancy's wife and Szymanski's partner succeed in talking the two men back to their car, but they part on angry terms.⁴² Both men seethe for a while, but Fancy, after considering exiling Szymanski to a predominantly black neighborhood, eventually decides to get the young officer transferred to the 15th precinct. They will be forced to interact more regularly, perhaps to Szymanski's benefit. Typical to his character, Fancy is shown to have great wisdom, and though the idea is never mentioned, it is conceivable Fancy hopes he can have a similar influence on Szymanski as he has had on Sipowicz.

Two years later, Szymanski has begun to show some signs of a Sipowicz-like transformation when one day his own racial biases seem to appear, this time with terrible consequences. Off duty, he spots several men sprinting down the sidewalk. Before he can understand what is happening a bullet hits him in the shoulder. He wheels around and sees a black man holding a gun; Szymanski does not realize it is an undercover "plainclothes" cop chasing two robbery suspects. He pulls out his gun and shoots the cop five times at close range.

Sipowicz and the other detectives arrive on the scene much later. The shooting is not shown on camera, which leaves room for much ambiguity, both for Sipowicz and for the

⁴² "Taillight's Last Gleaming."

audience. Fancy gets more involved in the case than usual because of his history with Szymanski; he may feel some guilt over the part he played in steering Szymanski's career.

Sipowicz works the case with his partner Danny Sorensen (Ricky Schroder), who replacing the deceased Bobby Simone two episodes prior. The youthful Sorensen presses another young cop who happened to be nearby for his version of the events. Eventually, the nervous, officer admits that he fired the bullet that hit Szymanski in the shoulder; he was aiming at the black plainclothes policeman, having made the same mistake as Szymanski.

Sipowicz and, eventually, Fancy conclude that there is no pure villain to find in the whole mess, just a series of mistakes made by a bunch of cops reacting in the moment. Plainclothes cops, as Sipowicz emphasizes in Szymanski's defense, are required to wear a certain color designated each day to help indicate their identities to other police. Talking to the wounded cop's partner, Sipowicz discovers they were not wearing red, the so-called "color of the day." The plainclothes cop pulls out a red arm band and explains that, to help hide their identity, they often keep their color concealed until a situation escalates. Today they did not have time to get their red arm bands on before they started chasing the robbers. However, Fancy believes, and the audience can easily suspect, that it was skin color not clothing color that rushed Szymanski's trigger-finger. As Fancy observes, "Five bullets is a lot of bullets." Sipowicz is quick to defend Szymanski, and not without justification; he argues it is Fancy who, motivated by his own lasting resentment, is out to get Szymanski. Sipowicz, of course, has lasting resentments of his own.

The more the facts become clearer, the more firmly Sipowicz and Fancy cling to their perceptions of the incident. Sorensen, fresh to the office, is a stunned bystander as the two veterans become enraged. "I'm interested in Szymanski's mindset," declares Fancy, but of course that is impossible to know. Sipowicz accuses Fancy of trying to destroy Szymanski's

career. “Hey boss!” Sipowicz shouts condescendingly. “If you still need to hurt Szymanski, you better do it with a blunt instrument, because he was right in this shooting!” In the background, a car honks, as if some distant warning telling Sipowicz to pump the breaks. He does not hear it, and instead sticks his thumb dismissively in Fancy’s face and storms out of the room, heading to the locker room.

Fancy hesitates for a few beats, staring narrowly at the space in front of his eyes as if Sipowicz’s thumb were still there. Then he turns to glare out his office window at Sipowicz storming away. With only the briefest glance at young Sorensen, he leaves his office to follow Sipowicz.

Stunned, Sorensen hesitates a few more seconds before following the two men. The only sounds after Sipowicz finishes his rant are the blinds rattling on Fancy’s office door every time each man passes through it, followed by their footsteps covering the path through the detectives’ desks to the locker room. The plainclothes partner of the wounded cop sits silently watching the procession.

Fancy bursts into the locker room. Sipowicz wheels to face his boss. Grunting like an animal, Sipowicz charges at Fancy and hits him with a right hook. They grapple and Fancy connects with his own right fist.

Sitting by himself on the other side of the closed locker room door, the plainclothes cop turns to listen to the commotion as Sorensen hurries to intervene.

He arrives to see them each trade another pair of punches before he grabs Sipowicz and pulls them apart. After establishing an uneasy cease fire, Sorensen leaves to go get the first aid kit in Fancy’s office, pausing on the return trip to warn the plainclothes cop, “You didn’t hear nothin’!”

Back in the locker room, Sipowicz and Fancy are slumped on either side of the room, still glowering at each other. The young detective puts the first aid kit on the sink between them. He berates the older policemen, threatens to transfer from the squad, and locks the two men in the room so they can clean themselves up. Calmer, Sipowicz and Fancy wordlessly assess their battered faces in the mirrors as the episode quietly cuts to commercial.

“Raging Bulls” and Rodney King

Titled “Raging Bulls” after the boxing film *Raging Bull*, the episode makes no allusions to Rodney King, but the juxtaposition of the two clashes reveals how *N.Y.P.D. Blue* sketches a path to redemption for racist cops like Sipowicz.⁴³ The beatings of Rodney King seem only explicable as a brutal combination of racial malice and excessive abuse of power, while the Sipowicz-Fancy fight is a shocking explosion of a complex relationship. *N.Y.P.D. Blue*’s audience, after five and a half years of storytelling and character development, know quite a bit about Fancy and Sipowicz’s mindset. Fans of the show know Sipowicz’s temper and his earnest striving to overcome his long-held prejudices. They know Fancy is soft-spoken but blunt, slow to anger, but deeply and justifiably sensitive to racial issues. And they know Sipowicz and Fancy have struggled to achieve a polite, professional relationship. In this way, the fictional characters of a television drama are more deeply knowable than the real human beings that appear on the news; the audience is able to spend more time with the imagined characters, viewing their most intimate moments. The brutal reality of the Holliday video demands public condemnation, but the layered fiction of *N.Y.P.D. Blue* invites careful contemplation of the two characters.

The settings of both scenes of violence reveal their cultural implications. The King video is shot from a distance; while they may have noticed or sensed the presence of onlookers, the

⁴³ The film, *Raging Bull* (1980), was directed by Martin Scorsese and starred Robert DeNiro.

cops, operating in the darkness of night, almost certainly did not consider that they were being recorded on video. Still, they beat King outside, in public, in their supposed roles as public servants. When Fancy follows Sipowicz into the locker room and closes the door, both men implicitly understand that they are engaged in a private confrontation. Sipowicz's explanation to Sorenson after the fact, "We weren't in there as cops," would be a ridiculous and indeed damning defense for King's beaters to have claimed, but that is just how Fancy and Sipowicz understand their fight.

The locker room on *N.Y.P.D. Blue* is the most private room in the office, and is regularly used for private conversations between detectives. Sipowicz has some of his most intimate conversations in the locker room, including a memorable scene when he grapples with his own prejudices in front of his sympathetic, uncomfortable, and dismayed partner, Bobby Simone in the season four episode, "Where's 'Swaldo?'"⁴⁴ The rest of the office, from Fancy's centrally located, glassed-in position to the interview room with the two-way mirror, is something of a panopticon.⁴⁵ The detective's desks are somewhat jumbled in the area around Fancy's office. The camera often catches and emphasizes the characters observing one another's comings and goings and eavesdropping on each other's conversations. Fancy can close the door to his office to muffle the words of difficult and intense discussions, but the camera frequently spots characters glancing into his office, guessing at the content of conversations. The break room, with its pot of coffee and fridge, is ostensibly a place for comfort, but frequently an awkward conversation will be interrupted by the arrival of another member of the office. Only the locker room offers some semblance of privacy.

⁴⁴ "Where's 'Swaldo?'"

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 195-228.

However, the members of the detective squad are best served when they share their problems with each other. Throughout the series, characters receive both therapeutic release and practical guidance when they confess a personal crisis to one or more detectives in the office. Thus, this fight is quickly revealed to the rest of the group. They are concerned, but they do not even consider putting the two men at risk of discipline by reporting the kerfuffle to the bureaucracy. Sipowicz and Fancy are good cops, and good cops, like good brothers, look out for each other.

Character Types on Police Dramas

After the fight, the episode returns from commercial to the activities of other detectives. Some time passes before the episode cuts back into the locker room, where Sipowicz and Fancy are still cleaning themselves up. Sipowicz breaks the silence. “We gotta figure something out,” he declares, and thus the two men tacitly acknowledge that their brawl was about their own past, not about Szymanski. They talk awhile, airing their bitterness. “I got your number. I know what you are,” Sipowicz says at one point. Fancy, more circumspect, counters, “Any cop. All colors. I feel like I understand you the best. Now how can that be?” Earlier, Fancy was trying to read Szymanski’s thoughts. Now, he realizes he knows Sipowicz’s mind better than anyone’s. After all this time, the two men really do know each other. In subsequent seasons, this realization guides their relationship until Lieutenant Fancy is promoted out of the 15th precinct.⁴⁶ Thrust together by their job, the two men reach a certain level of mutual respect for each other’s professional abilities. This in turn allows them to tolerate each other’s flaws long enough to see the good in each other’s personalities. Ultimately, a kind of familial love grows between the two

⁴⁶ James McDaniel left the show of his own volition, citing both family and career ambitions. Mike Duffy, “James ‘Lt. Fancy’ McDaniel’s Last Day on the ‘NYPD Blue’ Set,” *Philadelphia Enquirer*, February 7, 2001, D8.

men. There is always a racial component to the relationship between Fancy and Sipowicz, including their fight. But when they start clobbering each other in the locker room, racial difference is surpassed by familiarity. A personal dispute starts the brawl, and brotherly respect stops it; indeed, this fight was their final one.

The specifics of the Sipowicz-Fancy relationship—a racist white protagonist working for a black boss—were unique within television dramas when *N.Y.P.D. Blue* first aired. Indeed, it is hard to imagine network television daring to create a character like Sipowicz in earlier decades. Archie Bunker was a parody of racism, and *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-79), while it kept Archie Bunker more or less lovable, also set him up to be a fool. Bunker would ludicrously accuse anyone who disagreed with his bigotries of spouting communist propaganda that they had picked up on their dangerous college campus. The other characters' reactions as well as the laugh track emphasized his wrongness.⁴⁷ Archie, like Sipowicz, was old-fashioned in his prejudices, but the show made him look ridiculous for his obstinacy while Sipowicz, on occasion, seems genuine in his desire to change himself. Sipowicz, excellent at his job, is no fool, nor is he a parody of a racist cop. Archie is forever set in his views. Sipowicz, symbolizing white America's slow yet steady learning curve in its racial attitudes, gradually breaks free of his biases.

More broadly, the dynamic between Sipowicz and Fancy is related to a dynamic typical in crime fiction: the talented but individualistic cop and his angry, by-the-book boss. The tough boss character is observable on shows like *The Rookies* (ABC, 1972-76), *Starsky and Hutch* (ABC, 1975-79), and *T.J. Hooker*. The main characters in these shows are often successful precisely because they ignore the rantings of their bosses and do things their own way; the

⁴⁷ A famous study found much of the audience did not read Archie as satire and sympathized with his conservative views. Neil Vidmar and Milton Rokeach, "Archie Bunker's Bigotry: A Study in Selective Perception," *Journal of Communication* 24 (1974), 36-47.

American individualist myth is thus upheld.⁴⁸ Sipowicz and Fancy fit this mold only to the extent that they do not get along, and occasionally their conflicts cause Sipowicz to resent Fancy for impeding his ability to do his job. In fact, Sipowicz knows he must repress his bigotries in order to interact effectively with both his coworkers and the larger community. He knows his individualism must be subordinate to many of the basic rules of behavior required by the job as well as the needs of his fellow detectives in the precinct.

In the show's early years, Sipowicz had less self-control, and his flaws often revealed themselves despite his best efforts. In a season one episode, Sipowicz becomes increasingly irritated at the resistance a black college student puts up to his questioning.⁴⁹ Finally, Sipowicz loses his temper, shouting, "Now how do you want me to go about this, huh? Maybe I should start each question with, uh, you know, 'I'm sorry for the injustices the white man has inflicted upon your race, but can you provide me any information?' Or, 'I'm sorry your people are downtrodden for 300 years, but did you discuss the layout of the Sloane house with any of your friends?'"⁵⁰ Then, the student justifiably calls Sipowicz "a racist scumbag," but years later, through the influence of his workplace family, Sipowicz has now changed.

Fancy, for his part, is not the overbearing boss so archetypal in the genre. Nor is he the out-of-touch paper-pusher unaware of or uninterested in the daily activities of the detectives under his command, as L.A.P.D.'s Police Chief Daryl Gates was criticized for being after the Rodney King beating.⁵¹ Fancy is something of a father figure in his office, and, at home, a much

⁴⁸ There are many other, even more classic examples of this theme in film, most notably *Dirty Harry* (1971).

⁴⁹ "Oscar, Meyer, Weiner," *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season one, episode 10 (ABC, Dec. 7, 1993).

⁵⁰ Vest, 49-50.

⁵¹ For example, Glenn F. Bunting, "Woo Says Gates Should Quit or be Fired City Hall: Fellow Councilmen Braude and Yaroslavsky Take Similar, but Softer, Stands. Chief Says Criticism Distracts the LAPD," *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 1991.

more successful father than Sipowicz, raising three children as well as, for a period, a foster child.⁵² Through “Raging Bulls,” Sipowicz’s position relative to Fancy is rather Oedipal. If Fancy is Sipowicz’s hated surrogate father, the job would be his beloved mother. Sipowicz, though, is more of a fatherly figure to the other detectives in the precinct, especially to his young male partners.⁵³

But Sipowicz’s love of his job does not bring him to destroy Fancy. Instead, the fight leads the two men, finally, to recognize their brotherly bond and begin to see each other as equals; the precinct has two daddies. In one of McDaniel’s final episodes as Fancy, Sipowicz, distraught at Fancy’s promotion to a different job, manages to splutter out the compliment, “I have respect for you.” Fancy, touched, replies honestly, “I have respect for you, too.” It is the kindest exchange the two men have on the show, and it firmly indicates the balance their relationship ultimately achieves. Fancy has seen Sipowicz at some of his lowest, most loathsome moments. They fought like brothers, but the job has forced the two men to spend much of their lives together in the same building. Eventually, Fancy witnessed and helped bring about Sipowicz’s transformation into a better man. Their respect comes from Sipowicz’s appreciation of Fancy’s role in his transformation, and Fancy’s corresponding sympathy for Sipowicz’s earnest desire to self-improve.

Workplace as Family

The detective’s squad in *N.Y.P.D. Blue*’s 15th Precinct is a workplace family, one that looks out for each other amidst the stresses of job and life. Sipowicz reciprocates the care and

⁵² Fancy’s foster child, Maceo, appears in “Up on the Roof,” *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season one, episode 12 (ABC, January 4, 1994) and “Unembraceable You,” *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season four, episode eight (ABC, December 10, 1996). Fancy discovers his wife is pregnant with their third child—and first boy—in “Good Time Charlie,” *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season one, episode 20 (ABC, May 3, 1994).

⁵³ The goofy Detective Greg Medavoy, the only other character besides Sipowicz to remain on the series from season one through its finale, would be the crazy uncle.

attention his coworkers give him. He helps convince another alcoholic detective, Diane Russell (played by Kim Delaney), to enter Alcoholics Anonymous.⁵⁴ When Sipowicz's partner and Russell's husband, Simone, passes away from a heart infection, Sipowicz gives Russell the emotional support he had required earlier in the series after other personal tragedies.⁵⁵ These are only a few examples of the familial care the precinct's detectives show each other throughout the series.

The show's co-creators, Steven Bochco and David Milch, both worked at MTM Enterprises, which had led the proliferation of workplace sitcoms, beginning with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-77). MTM continued to explore the theme of workplace families in its dramas, from the *Mary Tyler Moore* spin-off, *Lou Grant* (CBS, 1977-82) to *Hill Street Blues*. As Robert J. Thompson puts it, almost all of the groups of characters on MTM's shows are "united by institutional ties, not biological ones."⁵⁶

Camaraderie exists on every television drama involving a partnership of two or more police officers, but cop shows rarely delved so deeply into the intimacy of relationships between officers as they did on *Hill Street Blues* and especially *N.Y.P.D. Blue*. *CHiPs* (NBC, 1977-83), for example, is about a squad of motorcycle-riding California Highway Patrolmen. A more lighthearted police drama, the *CHiPs* gang never had to confront the main character, Ponch, about a problem with alcoholism. The camaraderie on *CHiPs* is cheery and shallow, while the family dynamic on *N.Y.P.D. Blue* is tense and deep.

⁵⁴ Sipowicz and Simone both help get Russell to confront her drinking problem from the end of season two into the beginning of season three.

⁵⁵ "Hearts and Souls," *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season six, episode five (November 24, 1998).

⁵⁶ Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 49-50.

Predating *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the military sitcoms popular in the 1950s and '60s also depicted characters unified by institution rather than biology. Examples include *The Phil Silvers Show* (CBS, 1955-59; also known as *Sgt. Bilko* and *You'll Never Get Rich*), *McHale's Navy* (1962-66), and *F Troop* (1965-67). These sitcoms did not approach the seriousness of cop dramas, but the happy brotherhood depicted in these shows resembles the bonds that form on *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, linking all of these series to a broader understanding of uniformed peacekeepers throughout American popular culture. This understanding is rooted in a lasting cultural memory of World War II, the "good war" fought against the perfect villain, Hitler. While none of these shows were actually set in World War II, they epitomize a pre-Vietnam sense of the military as family. Hollywood has been particularly crucial for maintaining the idea of the brotherhood formed in the shared experience of fighting in war, from *The Longest Day* (1962) to *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Even as the films about Vietnam that emerged in the late 1970s through the 1980s dismantled the glorification of war, many of their characters felt a brotherly affection for one another.⁵⁷

Depictions of police officers throughout television and film emphasize a similar camaraderie, and *N.Y.P.D. Blue* falls into this long tradition. Sipowicz, after all, was a soldier before he was a police officer. Elsewhere on television, other dramas were exploring characters in sacrificial jobs, putting their own happiness at risk to benefit a greater public good.

N.Y.P.D. Blue and ER, Sipowicz and Ross

N.Y.P.D. Blue and *Law & Order*, the two most popular cop dramas of the decade, both celebrate the institution of the big city police department. Like *Hill Street Blues* before them,

⁵⁷ Films like *Platoon* (1984) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) certainly complicated the idea of military comradery, but characters still bonded over their shared experience.

both acknowledged the institution was not without flaws, but unlike the setting in *Hill Street Blues*, the city's crime and decay never threaten to overwhelm the police. *ER* (NBC, 1994-2009), the most popular drama of the 1990s, similarly resembles MTM's other classic 1980s drama, *St. Elsewhere* (NBC, 1982-88). Like *Hill Street Blues*, *St. Elsewhere*'s urban setting seemed ever-poised to overwhelm its talented staff. Like *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, *ER*'s hospital became much more preoccupied with the flaws within the personal lives of its characters than the flawed community creating the endless stream of hospital patients.

On *ER*, George Clooney's breakout role as Dr. Doug Ross is most akin to *N.Y.P.D. Blue*'s Sipowicz. Another individualistic, flawed hero, Ross shows up at the ER at night in the first scene of the series, drunk and barely able to stand. His colleague and friend, Dr. Mark Greene (Anthony Edwards), hooks him up to an I.V. to speed him along to sobriety in time for his morning shift.⁵⁸ Ross's personal life is in shambles; a womanizer, he admits he has a son whom he has never met.⁵⁹ Like Sipowicz, he is both excellent at his job and passionate about it. A pediatric physician, he, also like Sipowicz, is particularly moved by the suffering of children and enraged when adults put kids in harm's way.

The strict institutional oversight is more of an obstacle for Ross and the other doctors and nurses in his ER. The leadership of the police bureaucracy above Fancy on *N.Y.P.D. Blue* is an unseen nuisance, primarily noticed when it awards or withholds promotions. Internal Affairs, or "the Rat Squad" as Sipowicz disgustedly refers to them, regularly shows up in the office when there is the faintest sign of police officer misbehavior. On *ER*, Ross and the other young doctors

⁵⁸ "24 Hours," *ER*, season one, episode one (NBC, September 19, 1994).

⁵⁹ "Luck of the Draw," *ER*, season one, episode 13 (NBC, January 12, 1995). This significant bit of trivia about Dr. Ross is never fully explored on the series. One might expect the character's own redemptive arc to include a reconciliation with the child he has never met, but *ER* never revisits the story.

are often suffering from the omnipresent oversight of their superiors. Ross in particular is willing to bend and break rules when he believes it will help his patients.

In a season four episode, the hospital is forced to release a drug-addicted six-month old to his mother. Ross, knowing the mother steals the baby's prescribed methadone, decides to attempt a risky procedure to detox the child without the mother's permission, before she can take him home.⁶⁰ Ross is caught in the act, but the baby survives, which helps Ross escape with only 30 days on probation. His job is saved, but the escapade harms his already prickly relationship with his superiors.⁶¹

Ultimately, Ross's maverick behavior goes too far for the hospital. Another scandal erupts when Ross helps a mother euthanize her terminally ill son. Ross resigns his position and moves to Seattle, just in time for Clooney to focus on his burgeoning film career. In future episodes, characters occasionally mention he is still happily practicing medicine.⁶²

True to the individualist ideal, Ross's personality along with his skill make him a hero on the show and a tolerable asset to the hospital even when his decisions cause complications for the institution from time to time. Most of the characters on *ER* share Ross's passion for the hospital's patients. Still, Ross would be least likely of all the show's characters to consider hospital policy or politics, trusting instead that his own instincts will best serve his patients. When he finally creates a scandal that is too large for the hospital to deal with, he nobly resigns, never once doubting his own actions. Had Ross changed careers, it would have been a signal of

⁶⁰ "Suffer the Little Children," *ER*, season four, episode 21 (NBC, May 7, 1998).

⁶¹ "A Hole in the Heart," *ER*, season four, episode 22 (NBC, May 14, 1998). This is the season finale.

⁶² These events happen in "Choosing Joi," *ER*, season five, episode 13 (NBC, February 4, 1999), "The Storm: Part 1," *ER*, season five, episode 14 (NBC, February 11, 1999), and "The Storm: Part 2," *ER*, season five, episode 15 (NBC, February 18, 1999). Clooney appeared as Ross in a few episodes of the show's fifteenth and final season, further emphasizing the happy ending for the character.

failure for the institution that it was unable to support a person of his talent and passion.

However, he is able to continue his career at a different hospital, thus signaling the value such individualists hold for the medical system in its service to the American public. Just as Fancy protects Sipowicz, there is always a place for Ross's talents despite his tendency to create controversy.

From Dr. Greene's hangover cure in the first episode through Ross's departure, he is helped through his personal problems by his friends in the hospital. His self-destructive tendencies are tempered by the care of his co-workers. Just as in *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, *ER* portrays a surrogate family that forms within the work space of the hospital. Indeed, as on *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, many of the characters on the show do in fact couple with their coworkers to form actual families. Ross himself ultimately marries Nurse Manager Carol Hathaway (Juliana Margulies) after she and their twin daughters follow him to Seattle. Dr. Greene, on the other hand, sees his marriage fall apart when his wife, a lawyer, takes a job in Milwaukee and he is unwilling to leave his position in the Chicago ER. He too finds a new wife at the hospital, and his marriage to surgeon Elizabeth Corday lasts until Greene's death from an inoperable brain tumor in season eight. The coupling on *N.Y.P.D. Blue* and *ER* resembles the coupling on *Friends*. In the sitcom, the characters only manage to find true romantic love within their tiny, intimate community of friends-as-family. On the dramas, the characters maintain happy marriages only when they couple within the workplace-as-family.

9/11 Heroes

N.Y.P.D. Blue's co-creator, David Milch, went on to create *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-2006), a Western that twists many of the themes found in the typical cop show and its Western predecessors. The show is still about the project of creating order in a wild setting, but instead of

an individualist hero embodying the law, *Deadwood* tells the story of a community of violent men relying on violence to build an ordered society out of the frontier mud.⁶³ The town's goal is similar to Sipowicz's project of personal transformation, but the methods are very different. Though the genre is not as popular as it once was, American popular culture regularly returns to the Western, and *Deadwood* presented yet another reimagining of the themes of the Western myth. In the meantime, a national trauma had led America itself to reassess the popular perception of the nation's cops.

Just after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, America's fire fighters and police officers were lionized as heroes. The race of both responders and victims was erased at the World Trade Center site where everyone was covered in dust and ash from the destroyed towers.⁶⁴ Thus, at the very moment when American culture was celebrating police officers as the epitome of American heroism, the racial problems of law enforcement and even the very racial identities of law enforcers were obscured and forgotten.

The 2001-02 primetime season was delayed, pushed back in part by network coverage of 9/11 and its immediate aftermath, but also stalled to give television shows time to decide how to respond to 9/11. *Friends* began its eighth season on September 27. The comedy did not acknowledge the terrorist attacks that happened in its home setting, as though the six friends were so pre-occupied with the drama of their own intimate community they had missed the whole event. It is difficult to imagine how *Seinfeld* would have grappled with 9/11 in the midst

⁶³ Daniel Worden, "Neo-liberalism and the Western: HBO's *Deadwood* as National Allegory," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 39, No. 2 (2009), 221-246.

⁶⁴ Jeffrey Melnick, *9/11 Culture: America under Construction* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 98.

of declarations that America had entered an “end of the age of irony.”⁶⁵ *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, on the other hand, explicitly referred to the attacks and the deaths of police officers in its first episodes of season nine, which began November 6. In the first episode, dedicated to the memory of New York City’s police and firefighters who died on 9/11, Sipowicz discovers the body of his missing partner, Sorensen, buried in Brooklyn.⁶⁶ After identifying the body, a distraught Sipowicz wanders over to gaze across the water towards Manhattan. He is not, in fact, staring at lower Manhattan, where the Twin Towers once stood, as the scene was filmed before 9/11. But seen after 9/11, the image memorializes the attacks, engaging with what would have been on viewers’ minds when the episode first aired.⁶⁷

N.Y.P.D. Blue had always established the New York City setting with quick images of people and objects on the city streets, accompanied by the show’s punchy guitar soundtrack. After 9/11, the content of these brief montages changed noticeably. Here is a breakdown of one such series of images that appears at the beginning of the season eight finale, the last episode before 9/11:⁶⁸

- The first image opens on a shot of the tops of New York skyscrapers before panning quickly down to the street level traffic heading away from the camera.

⁶⁵ For example, Roger Rosenblatt, “The Age of Irony Comes to an End,” *Time*, September 24, 2001. Rosenblatt and other writers suggested the traumatic reality of the violent attacks might shock American culture out of its sensibility of detached sarcasm. Needless to say, their predictions would not come to pass. See chapter four for more on the supposed “end of irony.”

⁶⁶ The full dedication appears at the very beginning of the episode, before Sipowicz’s voice introduces, “Previously on *N.Y.P.D. Blue*.” It reads:

NYPD BLUE wishes to dedicate its season to the memory of the New York City Police and Firefighters who sacrificed their lives on September 11th, 2001. Their heroism will never be forgotten and we extend our deepest sympathies to their families and loved ones.

⁶⁷ “Lie Like a Rug,” *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season nine, episode one (ABC, November 6, 2001).

⁶⁸ “In the Wind,” *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season eight, episode 20 (ABC, May 22, 2001).

- Cut to several unidentifiable people, mostly with their backs to the camera, standing or walking on a sidewalk in front of a colorful public mural on the side of a building.
- Cut to more street art, this time black and white images of skaters as three women walk from left to right, their faces obscured from the camera's view.
- Cut to brown rooftops, then a quick pan to the roof of a familiar building, the 15th precinct. There is only a brief glimpse of an American flag flying above the structure.
- Cut to the front door of the precinct, then quick pan up to the 2nd floor window.
- Cut to the interior, where the characters are working. The story begins.

And here is a breakdown of the first montage after the opening credits of the first episode after 9/11:⁶⁹

- Open on a busy street at street level. Cars are coming towards us. Two American flags fly next to a McDonald's flag over the restaurant.
- Cut to a double-decker tour bus, filled with tourists.
- Cut to a woman crossing a street holding a little dog close to her chest, passing another woman walking towards the camera.
- Cut to the 15th precinct building from afar, and then snap zoom into an American flag flying over the building.
- Cut to the interior of the building where two men stand whispering to each other, their hands cuffed behind their backs. Pan to the front door at the background of the shot where the detectives are entering the building. The story picks up from here.

The transformation was like going from the harsh urban solitude of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* to the brightness of Pierre Renoir's *Moulin de la Galette*. Images such as the busy

⁶⁹ "Lie Like a Rug."

tour bus made the city seem more vibrant and less cold than the emptier, faceless pre-9/11 shots. Also, the images were more likely to show people's faces, and to show people and traffic heading towards the camera. In general, after 9/11 they were more likely to include American flags and fire fighters. The pre-9/11 scenes seemed to depict a colder, lonelier city of ragged, anonymous people struggling through their lives. After 9/11, the montages re-humanized the city, depicting it as unified, strong, and full of life. *N.Y.P.D. Blue* continued to celebrate the police defending that life for the city's inhabitants. Still, the attacks did not drastically change the tone or content of the show. After all, the detectives of the 15th precinct had always been unified, strong, and intimately invested in each other's lives.

The 9/11 attacks were an abrupt reminder of the violence in the outside world. Americans, suffering a rare attack on its own soil, sensed a new vulnerability. The terrorist attacks suddenly framed the nineties as a relatively innocent period, and to an extent that memory of the nineties still persists.⁷⁰ The work of Sipowicz and his fellow detectives took on both an added importance as well as greater appreciation in the post-9/11 period. Sipowicz's personal transformation continued; in the amped up stakes and enhanced prestige of his job post-9/11, how could he dare to backslide? In the 2005 series finale, Sipowicz is finally elevated to the position of squad commander, officially certifying the personal progress he made over the course of the series.

N.Y.P.D. Blue thus tells the story of personal transformation within a job that, like Sipowicz, may have flaws but is ultimately demonstrated to be successful. After all, the crime

⁷⁰ For example, in 2014, the National Geographic Channel aired a three-part documentary called *The 90's: The Last Great Decade*. James Wolcott questions nineties nostalgia, noting "September 11, 2001, and the Iraq war cast a pall over everything that has come after." James Wolcott, "No, No, Nine-Ettes," *Vanity Fair*, August 2014, accessed November 12, 2015, <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2014/08/90s-culture-nostalgia>.

rate continued to decline. America seemed safer. The system *was* working. And no television show emphasized this theme more than *Law & Order*.

Chapter 3

Law & Order in Wonderland: *The Decline of Radicalism and the Re-Ascendance of the Justice System*

*“The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin’
And the first one now
Will later be last
For the times they are a-changin’.”*

—Bob Dylan, “The Times They Are a-Changin,’” 1964

*“People are crazy, and things are strange.
I’m locked in tight. I’m out of range.
I used to care, but things have changed.”*

—Bob Dylan, “Things Have Changed,” 2000

The *Alice in Wonderland* stories began as spoken tales Charles Lutwidge Dodgson told to the three daughters of a close friend. If not for the pestering of the youngest of those girls, Alice Liddell, Dodgson might never have published the stories.¹ Written under the pen name Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* appeared in 1865, followed by *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* in 1871. Almost exactly a century later, in 1967, *Jefferson Airplane* released the *Wonderland*-inspired “White Rabbit,” a song that used the character Alice’s willingness to experiment with Wonderland’s mysterious foods and drinks to reference the drug use of the youth counterculture that emerged in the 1960s. That generation was waging its own campaign to pester the American government to end the Vietnam War.

¹ “Alice’s Recollections of Carrollian Days,” from Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, Donald J. Gray, ed., Norton Critical Edition, 2nd ed., (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 276-77. Originally published in “Alice’s Recollections of Carrollian Days. As Told to Her Son, Caryl Hargreaves,” *Cornhill* (1932), 1-12.

By the nineties, as the baby boomers who participated in that protest era reached middle age, they could look back on the anti-war movement with more or less consensus; their pestering had been justified. However, not every member of that generation was as innocent in their dogged persistence as young Alice Liddell. *Law & Order*'s October 1994 episode, "White Rabbit," revisits the more extreme manifestations of the anti-war movement, exploring the remnant of sixties experiences and events that still lingered into the nineties.²

Carroll's Alice first spots the White Rabbit checking his pocket watch and nervously muttering, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!"³ The episode "White Rabbit" is similarly preoccupied with the passage of time and its effect on America's memory of the sixties. Investigating a decades old crime, the main characters grapple with reminiscences—the suspects' and their own—of the many elements of the student protest culture epitomized in the Jefferson Airplane song. And like Lewis Carroll's Alice, the detectives pursue their quarry down a rabbit hole, following unexpected evidence until it leads them, quite abruptly, to a female activist involved in a robbery and shooting. Since the crime, the woman has changed, just as Alice undergoes several transformations in Carroll's books. A fugitive for two decades, she now has a husband and a son. She is a donor for the Republican Party. Like Dodgson/Carroll, she has taken an assumed name. Is she the same person? Should the law treat her as the same person? *Law & Order*'s characters disagree. Just as Carroll's anxious White Rabbit is always checking his

² For this chapter, I will refer to "the sixties" as they are understood in American popular culture—a largely symbolic reference to a period of broad social and cultural change and upheaval epitomized by student protests and counter-cultural movements most commonly tied to dissent against the Vietnam War. The sixties could be said to have lasted from the early 1960s well into the 1970s. Indeed, the precipitate crime for this episode of *Law & Order* occurred in 1971. Even so, the characters repeatedly refer to "the sixties" as the period when the events took place. I follow their lead.

³ Carroll, 7.

watch, the characters in this episode are also preoccupied with the passage of time and its influence on how they judge events of the past still lingering in the present.

Wonderland, however, is populated with mad people ruled by a mad queen. The laws of the queen's bizarre croquet game are never followed; her ordered beheadings are never carried out. Even Carroll's Alice, for all her fascination with Wonderland, ultimately finds she prefers the real world—the adult world where wild behavior is frowned upon and order is encouraged. This is the world depicted in *Law & Order*, where the servants of the law persist in their efforts to excise threats to order, building and maintaining a safe and comfortable society for the American community. The sixties may be remembered nostalgically, but as the show suggests, Americans are better off in the more stable nineties, having grown up and calmed down.

Ideology of the Procedural Drama

“White Rabbit” debuted on NBC at 10:00 PM on Wednesday, October 19, 1994. It was the fifth episode in *Law & Order*'s fifth season. That year *Law & Order* cracked the top 30 in the Nielsen ratings among prime time shows for the first time, beginning a steady rise to a peak of 5th place overall in the 2001-02 television season.⁴ It was also the year when *Law & Order*'s early seasons first started airing on cable. A&E network acquired syndication rights in 1994, and the show and its numerous spin-offs have peppered the daily cable schedule ever since.⁵ “White Rabbit” won its time slot that Wednesday night with a 13.6 rating and a 24 share.⁶

⁴ Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), 1692.

⁵ Rebecca Dana, “Law and Disorder; Producer Dick Wolf and NBC Are Battling over the Profits of One of the Richest TV Shows Ever; These Are Their Stories,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 2008.

⁶ *Variety*, October 24-30, 1994. To translate, that means 13.6 percent of American homes with televisions and 24% of televisions turned on at that time were tuned into the episode. In 1994-95, Nielsen counted 95,400,000 households with television, so a 13.6 rating means about 13 million households watched the episode. *Law & Order* averaged a 12.2 for the season, so it was an above-average episode. It is also worth noting that in the season *Law &*

While the basic storytelling engine of police dramas is usually found in their characters or setting, form shapes *Law & Order*'s narrative style. The typical episode is split into two halves. The first half follows the cops as they investigate a crime and apprehend a suspect. The second half follows prosecutors from the District Attorney's office as they bring the case to trial and eventually some sort of legal conclusion. The show is thus a police detective drama combined with a courtroom drama. While this split formula is somewhat unique, *Law & Order* fits into the genre of procedural dramas. Essentially, procedurals follow the investigation of a crime to its legal conclusion. Most shows in this genre are either police procedurals or courtroom procedurals; *Law & Order* is both.

In the world of *Law & Order*, the nature of the crime and the person who committed it may change from week to week, but the process remains the same. At the end of each episode, the result of the criminal's trial closes the case and concludes the episode, but it does not end the series. Another criminal will come along next week. Each episode delivers a sense of narrative resolution in the form of the verdict. However, sometimes the emotional resolution is incomplete if the verdict seems to conflict with the apparent truth of the case, or if the punishment does not fit the crime. In any event, the job of the police and prosecutors is never done. The town is never rid of bad guys, nor do the protagonists even dare to dream that their actions will lead to a perfectly peaceful, ordered world. Thus, any ideological comfort procedurals present to their audience does not come from the exorcism of evil, but from knowing the assembly line of justice is there, always ready to process the next unlawful act.

Dagnet (NBC, 1951-59) was the most significant early television procedural. Originally a radio show, the series was one of television's early hits, reaching second in the ratings behind *I*

Order finished highest ranked, 2001-02, it averaged a 12.6. As the networks lost ground the cable and the audience continued to fragment, the number needed to finish higher up the Nielsen rankings shrunk.

Love Lucy for the 1953-54 season.⁷ Creator and writer Jack Webb also starred as the main character, Joe Friday, a blunt, serious police detective in the hardboiled style already familiar to Americans from detective novels and films.⁸

However, it is not characterization which *Dragnet* predominately handed down to *Law & Order* but procedural style. Indeed, neither show is terribly interested in the private lives of its main characters. *Dragnet* and *Law & Order* are plot-driven, not character-driven; the main characters' traits, personalities, and backgrounds matter very little for the development of any given episode. Rather than pure action, both shows chronicle the more mundane steps of police work as a case is investigated. Overall, both shows aspire to a realistic aesthetic, and do so in several similar ways. Both shows begin with a voiceover narration, suggesting a documentary approach. *Law & Order's* narration vaguely echoes the introduction of its predecessor in style and the use of the word "story/stories." *Dragnet* explicitly claims, "...the story you are about to see is true." *Law & Order* opens with a deep-voiced narrator saying, "In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups: the police, who investigate crime, and the district attorneys, who prosecute the offenders. These are their stories." Both shows end not with a shootout but with a legal process; *Dragnet* uses another voiceover to explain the criminal's fate, while *Law & Order* uses its entire second half to depict the efforts of the prosecutors to wrap up the case.

The music of the two series is also comparable. Both shows feature memorable, oft-parodied musical cues that, once heard enough times, can probably be recognized just from their word descriptions on this page. *Dragnet's* nine famous notes begin each episode's theme song—

⁷ Douglas Snauffer, *Crime Television* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 11.

⁸ Jerry Orbach's Lenny Briscoe is the most obvious descendant of this archetype among *Law & Order's* extensive list of detectives. Appearing from 1991 until Orbach's death in 2004, Briscoe was the longest serving detective on the show.

dum-dee-dum-dum...dum-dee-dum-dum-DUMMMM. *Law & Order*'s theme song is also memorable, but perhaps even less notable than the two note stinger that occasionally marks a change of scene and time throughout each episode—DONG-DONG. Both cues are spare, urgent, and serious, just like the shows themselves.

Like *Law & Order*, *Dragnet* celebrated the system it portrayed; in fact, this was just what *Dragnet*'s creator set out to do. Webb admired police officers, and sought out the Los Angeles Police Department's assistance in creating his series. The L.A.P.D. gave Webb open access to its case files, so, indeed, all of *Dragnet*'s episodes were based on true stories. Webb also hung around with cops in the department to absorb their jargon, and, as he moved from radio to television, took classes in the Los Angeles Police Academy. This access not only helped Webb's pursuit of realism, but it also led to a favorable portrayal of police officers, a result Webb was all too pleased to achieve.⁹

Law & Order became well-known for creating stories that were "ripped from the headlines." Explaining the genesis of this strategy, the show's creator Dick Wolf says, "The background story is that, when [NBC president] Brandon Tartikoff bought the show, he said, 'What's the bible?' That's what you put together to say where the show is going and what the characters are going to become, et cetera, et cetera. I looked at him and said, 'Our bible is the front page of the *New York Post*.'"¹⁰

Wolf was not as infatuated with the justice system as Webb. Still, he was pleased that the show's angle would depict public prosecutors in a positive light. "...up until that point," Wolf says, "there had never been a legal show featuring prosecutors. I believed the heroes weren't the

⁹ Snauffer, 6-7.

¹⁰ David Martindale, "L&O's Secret Ingredient," Turner Network Television, 2006, accessed September 1, 2015, <http://www.tntdrama.com/dramalounge/article/?oid=26513>.

defense attorneys who were getting these scumbags off. The heroes were the prosecutors, working for a tenth of the money and putting them away.”¹¹ While old reliable Joe Friday is clearly the main character in *Dragnet*, it is harder to pinpoint *Law & Order*’s main character. The regular turnover in the series’ cast underscores the fact that *Law & Order* is about the justice system more than it is about any particular person. Still, the role which received the most climactic scenes over the course of the series was the Executive Assistant District Attorney. While actors rotated in and out of other roles, only two actors ever occupied the EADA role: Michael Moriarty as Ben Stone and Sam Waterston as Jack McCoy.¹² Carrying the burden of each episode’s climax, these characters are much more charismatic than Joe Friday, though equally dogged and single-minded. The audience knows a bit more about their backgrounds and their life outside of their employment than it knew about Friday, but not much more. It is their job, not their personal life, which the series is primarily interested in portraying, and it is their dedication to seeing through the entire process of their job that makes them heroes.

Between *Dragnet* and *Law & Order* lie many popular and not-so-popular iterations of the police procedural drama. Few relied on realism to the same degree.¹³ *The Untouchables* (ABC, 1959-1963) followed *Dragnet* in the procedural drama genre. Like *Dragnet*, its stories were inspired by reality, following Special Agent Elliot Ness’s Prohibition Era battles against organized crime in Chicago. Unlike *Dragnet*, which carefully avoided depictions of violent

¹¹ Kevin Courrier and Susan Green, *Law & Order: The Unofficial Companion* (Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1998), 18.

¹² Only S. Epatha Merkerson has appeared in more episodes than Sam Waterston, who joined the cast in 1994, a season after Merkerson became a regular. Both appeared until the series finale in 2010. Merkerson played the police lieutenant Anita Van Buren who supervised the detectives’ investigation each week.

¹³ Two lesser-known shows prefigured *Law & Order*’s two-tiered, investigation/trial structure: *Arrest and Trial* (ABC, 1963-64) and *The D.A.* (NBC, 1971-72). The latter was produced by Jack Webb. A TV executive showed Wolf an episode of *Arrest and Trial* after Wolf pitched *Law & Order*, but neither show was particularly influential. Courrier and Green, 18. Wolf also later produced a *Dragnet* remake starring Ed O’Neill (a.k.a *LA Dragnet*; ABC, 2003-04).

action, *The Untouchables* loaded its episodes with machine guns and murders. The result was strong ratings but also the attention of a Congressional committee investigating the series for its depiction of violence. There were some similarities between the protagonists of *Dragnet* and *The Untouchables*; like Joe Friday, TV's Elliot Ness (played by Robert Stack) was stoic and plain-spoken in the hardboiled tradition. However, as entertaining as Joe Friday's routines were depicted to be, his character was still just a typical good cop doing the good police work any officer might be expected to do. Elliot Ness, on the other hand, was an extraordinary figure leading an extraordinary team fighting extraordinary criminals.

Since *The Untouchables*, most of the police procedurals over the years have been built around a formula where either the main characters or the setting is extraordinary in some way.¹⁴ *Ironside* (NBC, 1967-1975), *Columbo* (NBC, 1968-78; ABC, 1989-2003), *Kojak* (CBS, 1973-78), and *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS, 1982-88) featured unique or charismatic main characters.¹⁵ Meanwhile, shows like *Hawaii Five-O* (CBS, 1968-1980), *CHiPs* (NBC, 1977-1983), and *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984-1990) were set in sunny, glamorous places—Hawaii, Southern California, and Miami.¹⁶ *Columbo* could not be *Columbo* without Detective Columbo. *CHiPs* could not have been spun off from the glamorous L.A. freeways to, say, the highways around Chicago. But *Law*

¹⁴ Of course, given the “pitch” and “pilot” models for network television production, most traditional scripted television shows are based on a premise involving some extraordinary character, setting, or situation. NBC took a creative leap with *Law & Order*.

¹⁵ Detective Robert Ironside solved crimes despite being wheelchair-bound. Lieutenant Columbo solved crimes despite appearing disheveled and absentminded. Detectives Christine Cagney and Mary Beth Lacey solved crimes while grappling with gender issues in and out of the workplace (despite being women, a chauvinist might say?). And Lieutenant Theo Kojak solved crimes despite being extremely bald.

¹⁶ *Miami Vice* is the most complex example out of the three. Miami served as more than just a geographic backdrop; it informed the show's color palette and its soundtrack.

& Order could and did replace every single one of its main characters and reset its formula in different places while still remaining essentially the same show.¹⁷

In *Law & Order*'s final season the show tied *Gunsmoke* (CBS, 1955-1975) as the longest running primetime drama in network history.¹⁸ A western, *Gunsmoke* was also about preserving law and order. Every week, some sort of villainy would threaten the peace of Dodge City, and it was up to Marshal Matt Dillon (James Arness) to confront and exorcise the problem. It sounds like *Law & Order*'s formula, except in *Gunsmoke* the system is embodied in Dillon. Without him, Dodge City would be overrun. The same is not true for anyone on *Law & Order*'s cast; its characters are merely replaceable cogs in the justice system.

Law & Order's ability to weather cast changes is further evidence of its unique nature, as well as its underlying ideology. *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS, 2000-present) followed *Law & Order*'s success as another plot-driven, police procedural drama that was successfully spun-off more than once. In comparison to *Law & Order*, besides using more music and energetic editing for a more stylized feel that emphasizes the tension in the case of the week, the *CSI* franchise relies heavily on its characters to add another layer of entertainment. Actors and their characters come and go from *CSI*'s large ensemble with at least as much regularity as on *Law & Order*. However, when a main character departs on *CSI*, the event is given much greater attention, both in the show's story as well as in critical and fan dialogue about the show. For example, when William Peterson, who starred as shift supervisor Gil Grissom for *CSI*'s first nine

¹⁷ *Law & Order* spin-offs with new casts and a few new settings included *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (NBC, 1999-present), *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* (NBC, 2001-11), *Law & Order: LA* (NBC, 2010-11), and *Law & Order: UK* (ITV, 2009-present).

¹⁸ Because of different programming structures in their respective times, there were more episodes of *Gunsmoke* than *Law & Order*: 635 to 456 according to IMDb.com, and that is not including *Gunsmoke*'s 1952-61 run on radio. *The Simpsons* will reach 589 episodes in 2016, its 27th season. But *Gunsmoke* was an hour-long show for 14 of its 20 seasons, so *The Simpsons* is still a long way from matching its mark for total hours of primetime scripted programming.

seasons, left the show, his character was given a tidy, happy ending in the form of a romantic rain forest rendezvous with his fiancée.¹⁹ Michael Moriarty's ADA Ben Stone departed the show after four seasons as its moral core, resigning after the Russian mafia killed a witness he had pestered into testifying. It is a conclusive episode for the character, but Stone's exit from *Law & Order* had much less gravity and pomp than Grissom's departure from *CSI*.²⁰ Also, Stone's final scene was a purely professional conclusion, while Grissom's last scene was entirely personal. Meanwhile, lesser regulars on *Law & Order* are lucky if their departure gets more than a mention.

Over the years, personal conflicts between characters on *Law & Order* were minor and rare. Though, from time to time, problems appear within the system, characters occasionally debate questions of justice, and the guilty party is not always convicted or even discovered, *Law & Order* portrays a system that functions smoothly. The system fulfills its responsibilities for society reasonably well, and it carries on tirelessly with the labor it has been assigned. Because of the plot-driven structure, the audience never sees the main characters taking a day or even an hour off. The audience does not see them driving from place to place.²¹ Unlike *N.Y.P.D. Blue*,

¹⁹ "One to Go," *CSI*, season nine, episode 10 (CBS, January 15, 2009).

²⁰ Moriarty's departure from the show was tumultuous. His relationship with Wolf deteriorated when Moriarty began a vocal campaign against Attorney General Janet Reno's push to decrease violence on television. After he left *Law & Order*, Moriarty began behaving increasingly erratically, and journalists who tracked him down in his self-imposed exile in Canada usually found him inebriated. After his conflict with Reno, he began writing regular op-eds on various subjects, his opinions becoming increasingly paranoid. He even wrote a book, *The Gift of Stern Angels* (Toronto: Exile Editions, Ltd., 1997), a meandering stream-of-consciousness memoir about his life and his political thinking. The best newspaper profile on Moriarty's post-*Law & Order* life is Shelley Page, "Slow Burn in Exile," *The Citizen's Weekly* (Ottawa), October 19, 1997. Moriarty's erratic behavior aside, his character's exit from the series was fairly typical.

²¹ To use "White Rabbit" as an example, after summarizing the background of the case to their superior, Detectives Logan and Briscoe announce they will be visiting the old gang. The scene cuts directly to the two questioning one character who has been freed from prison after serving her sentence. Following up on her comments, the detectives appear inside the prison interviewing another member of the gang. Then the action cuts to the prison parking lot, where Logan and Briscoe ponder the facts of the case. Thus, the action moves from the detectives strategizing at work to the detectives carrying out that strategy with two interviews to the detectives

for example, *Law & Order* does not use establishing shots to give the audience a chance to catch its breath.²² The energy of the process is relentless, but it is a comforting relentlessness because every step is made in the noble interests of law and order.

Nineties New York in Reality and on TV

As flexible as the series formula seems to be, the *Law & Order* franchise is, for practical reasons, closely tied to its New York City setting. For a period, *Law & Order* was the only network drama shot entirely in New York City.²³ On the other hand, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* has proven much more adaptable to different settings. A follower of *Law & Order* in the procedural genre, the original series takes place in Las Vegas. It has been spun-off into *CSI: Miami* (CBS, 2002-2012), *CSI: NY* (CBS, 2004-2013), and *CSI: Cyber* (CBS, 2015-present). *Law & Order*'s most popular spin-offs remain in New York City—*Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (NBC, 1999-present) and *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* (NBC, 2001-2011). Formulaically, *Law & Order* could work anywhere; its connection to New York is mostly a function of the franchise's production structure. Basing the shows in New York allows the production to draw from the city's huge pool of actors while still shooting enough scenes on location (out and about in New York rather than in a studio set) to convey its particular style of urban realism.²⁴

working out what they have learned and deciding on their next move. *Law & Order* is not a fast show in its visual pacing nor does it have much action, but it is written extremely tightly. There is little excess in the script, adding to the sense that there is no excess in the justice system being portrayed.

²² An establishing shot is, for example, a wide shot of an exterior of building that gives the viewers an idea where the ensuing scene is taking place.

²³ Bruce Weber, "Television; Dick Wolf Breaks and Enters with 'Law and Order' on NBC," *New York Times*, March 1, 1992.

²⁴ This also helps explain why the franchise has only ventured to Los Angeles and London, two other cities with a large population of actors from which to draw.

Law & Order established itself as a stalwart on NBC's schedule just at the moment when New York City was changing. Like *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, the early seasons of the show take for granted the idea of New York as a decaying, dangerous, and irredeemable urban landscape, but that vision was soon dated. As crime dropped, the outer boroughs slowly gentrified, and Manhattan became a friendlier destination for international tourists and a more comfortable home for the upper class.²⁵ Sitcoms had already indicated New York's socioeconomic transformation. The working class characters in *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979), *Welcome Back Kotter* (ABC, 1975-1979), and *Taxi* (ABC, 1978-1982; NBC, 1982-1983) gave way to characters rising (or even plucked) into wealthier circumstances in *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975-1985), *Diff'rent Strokes* (NBC, 1978-1985; ABC, 1985-1986), and *The Cosby Show* (CBS, 1984-1992).²⁶ Television presented an entirely different set of characters living in New York City—the young, white, single characters of shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends* who fretted more about their personality flaws and romantic lives than their job security and their safety in the city.

In its first few seasons, before the crime statistics began to suggest the city was undergoing a lasting transformation, the crimes in *Law & Order* tended to be related to a problem within the socio-economic fabric of the New York City community. Gradually, around the fifth season, the crimes in the series were more likely to be caused by an individual flaw. This tendency is exemplified by the premise of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)*, the spin-off that eventually surpassed its predecessor in ratings, which focuses on victims of sex

²⁵ For example, Blaine Harden and Jill Dutt, "Manhattan Floats on Tide of Money and Migration; Ebbing Crime Rate Energizes Population Series," *Washington Post*, May 25, 1997, A1-2.

²⁶ You may notice all three examples of socioeconomic climbers in and around the 1980s portray black characters in New York City. This reflects a complex web of perceptions about race, urban life, and socioeconomic developments in the period that I will point out but hold off on digging into here. I might also have included examples of series about female characters in this list, such as *Cagney & Lacey* (a drama, not a sitcom; NBC, 1982-1988) and *Kate & Allie* (CBS, 1984-1989).

crimes. The original *Law & Order* had done many episodes about sex crimes by the time *SVU* began in 1999. These stories are more about the private relationships between individuals rather than the public relationships between people and their urban community. Racism, socioeconomics, and other social issues continue to play a role in *Law & Order* cases but they are not the root source of most crimes. The essential problem is the broken individual; anger, mental illness, greed, and lust explain a criminal's motive in most episodes, rather than social inequality or government mismanagement.

A brief comparison of two episodes from 1992 and 1997 further reveals this subtle shift in the show's focus. Veteran actress Elaine Stritch made two appearances on two ostensibly similar episodes in season three and season seven. Both episodes were about a woman accused of murder. In both episodes, Stritch played Lanie Stieglitz, a well-known attorney who specialized in women's rights. In both cases, Stieglitz argues the defendant acted in self-defense because she was afraid she was about to be raped. The similarities unravel on closer inspection. In the season three episode, "Point of View" (November 25, 1992), for which Stritch won an Emmy,²⁷ the murder is eventually connected to organized crime, a topic that was prevalent in early seasons of *Law & Order* but became less common as the New York Mafia itself diminished in power.²⁸ In the season seven episode, "Working Mom" (February 26, 1997), the shooting is tied back to a suburban wife and mother who moonlights as a prostitute. In the trial, she admits to enjoying the excitement of prostitution as an escape from her middle class drudgery. The earlier episode focuses on the external urban problem of organized crime, while the later episode focuses on the

²⁷ The 1993 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Guest Actress in a Drama Series

²⁸ Perhaps the seminal signal of the Mafia's declining power in the nineties was the successful prosecution of John Gotti, Jr., the "Teflon Don," a one-time client of "White Rabbit" guest star, William Kunstler. In 1992 he received a life sentence for a variety of crimes, including two counts of ordering murder. He died in prison in 2002 of throat cancer.

internal psychology of a wife and mother looking for an escape from her private home life.

Airing during season five, 1994-95, “White Rabbit” falls around the time of this shift, although it focuses on a crime that occurred in and was motivated by an entirely different social and cultural context. By 1994, the New York City in *Law & Order* was more law-abiding and orderly than it had been in a long time; the series found inspiration for “White Rabbit” by returning to a moment from the past when America was particularly disorderly.

Down the Hole, and What the Detectives Found There

Like *Alice in Wonderland*, the episode begins with the discovery of a hole in the ground. Robbers have busted through a bank’s floor and stolen the contents of the bank’s safety deposit boxes. Detectives Lenny Briscoe (played by Jerry Orbach) and Mike Logan (Chris Noth) catch the thieves and track down the loot. Here the main story emerges serendipitously, as the safety deposit vault serves as a time capsule.²⁹ As they trace the stolen goods back to their owners, the detectives find a bag filled with money and a gun with its serial number filed off. Eventually, they discover the money was stolen in 1971 by a gang of anti-Vietnam War activists. They robbed an armored car, stealing money from a defense contractor. A police officer was killed in the robbery, and while three of the four members of the gang were eventually killed or captured, one, Susan Forrest, remains at large 23 years later. When she is tracked down, William Kunstler, the famous radical attorney guest starring as himself, arrives to defend her. Meanwhile, the prosecutors build their case by talking to her co-conspirators, eventually using her old friends against her.

²⁹ Illegal acts lead to the two breaks in the investigation; the bank robbery uncovers long lost evidence, and, as we will see, Nixon era wiretap records reveal important elements of the crime. There is no case to “solve” with the unauthorized wiretaps, but it is still interesting that even the initial bank robbery draws more consternation than the F.B.I.’s widespread invasion of privacy during the sixties and seventies.

Law & Order's writers conceived this story in the summer, around the time a real life fugitive drama played out on American television. On June 17, 1994, police charged former football star O.J. Simpson with the murder of his ex-wife and her boyfriend. Simpson then led police on a long, low-speed chase from the Los Angeles freeways to his home in Brentwood. All of the broadcast networks pre-empted their regular programming to follow the car chase, and the Simpson story would remain a television event for another year, throughout the criminal trial.³⁰

“White Rabbit’s” fugitive tale linked thematically to that news event, but the episode is actually based on the true story of Katherine Ann Power, a fugitive who surrendered in 1993 after two decades on the run.³¹ Opposing the Vietnam War, Power was part of a group that robbed an armory and then a bank, where they shot and killed a cop.³²

Collective Memory of the Sixties

Confronted by a story from the past, *Law & Order*'s regular characters discuss their variety of experiences in the sixties, suggesting a range subjective memories various Americans might have depending on their age and circumstances. For example, Briscoe reminisces about arresting student protesters, while the younger Logan remembers chasing free love with hippie girls at the same protests. Despite their different experiences, both characters find their memories

³⁰ Art Berman and John J. Goldman, “Nation Transfixed by Extraordinary Spectacle Chase: Millions are Riveted to TVs by Bizarre Pursuit of Simpson through Orange and Los Angeles Counties,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1994, 1.

³¹ Power was part of a group of four—two women and two men—who carried out the robbery. Other than the most basic parallels, the characters in “White Rabbit” are only loosely based on their real-life counterparts. This is typical of *Law & Order* episodes that are “ripped from the headlines.”

³² The episode also resembles the real-life 1981 Brink’s armored car robbery carried out by members of the Weather Underground. One of the participants, Kathy Boudin, was represented by her father’s law partner, Leonard Weinglass, who served alongside William Kunstler on the Chicago trial defense. Kunstler himself met with Boudin after the robbery. Weinglass won Boudin a relatively favorable plea bargain. She was released in 2003 while most of her co-conspirators will not be eligible for parole until 2058. Boudin was profiled at length in Elizabeth Kolbert, “The Prisoner,” *New Yorker*, July 16, 2001, before her first parole hearing. Kunstler did not represent Katherine Ann Power.

of the period as a whole are largely in agreement. Both accept student protests as a defining feature of the time, though neither aligns their past or present political passions with the movement. Briscoe opposed the protesters then because it was his job to maintain order. Logan was ambivalent about the protest movement as he chased sex.

The two partners' retrospective consideration of the sixties reveals how, as Maurice Halbwachs points out, collective memory is formed socially, not individually, as "a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present."³³ A quarter century later, the adult Logan works alongside Briscoe, the pair playing their assigned role in the system, investigating crimes and capturing criminals. Neither character feels any regret about his actions. Their behavior is acceptable, both according to their own personal moral codes and within the code of justice presented on the show. Briscoe admits he arrested protesters unapologetically, while Logan hints at his own phoniness wryly. As we will see, some of the radicals do not align with this collective memory. The job of *Law & Order's* protagonists, then, is not only to punish the radicals for their crimes but also to force them to comply with the collective memory of the sixties by confronting them with the gravity of their actions.

Finding Forrest

The two detectives track down Susan Forrest and discover she is married, living in the suburbs with her husband and son who know nothing of her criminal past. Like Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, she has suppressed and fled from her nightmares.³⁴ Unlike Alice, her escape is not the end of the story because her nightmares happened in the waking world. Alice becomes

³³ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 34. Halbwachs originally published *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* in 1925.

³⁴ Donald Rackin points out that, for Carroll, denial and suppression of nightmares is a heroic response. "Blessed Rage: Lewis Carroll and the Modern Quest for Order," Carroll, 402. Originally published in Edward Guiliano, ed., *Lewis Carroll, a Celebration: Essays on the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Birth of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson* (New York: C.N. Potter, 1982).

more adult through the wisdom of understanding her nightmares are fantasy, but neither time nor maturity will separate Forrest from her real life actions. Forrest, like all former radicals, must face the consequences of her past.

Forrest's lawyer, Kunstler, as well as her old associates and friends argue that the issue of Vietnam was serious enough to warrant her radical action. The murder was an unfortunate case of "collateral damage," as Kunstler puts it. Among the prosecutors, the debate splits into two parties. Executive Assistant District Attorney Jack McCoy (Sam Watterson) and his boss District Attorney Adam Schiff (Steven Hill) think Forrest's behavior is excusable because of the nature of the moment in time in which it occurred, and the time that has passed since her crime is enough to let her essentially slide. Their young Assistant District Attorney, Claire Kincaid (Jill Hennessy), argues convincingly that neither the crime's context nor the time that has passed since it was committed should affect the enforcement of the law.

In another way, the context of Forrest's crime is particularly important because, as Kunstler's arrival suggests, the sixties remain unsettled. Forrest remains unpunished, just as Kunstler is still riding the fame he gained at the 1969-70 Chicago Conspiracy trial. Kunstler embodies that radical moment, and the case in "White Rabbit" thus becomes a symbolic referendum on Kunstler's past success in defending extreme radicals.

Radicals on Trial

Sam Burdett, a black gunman serving a life sentence for the fatal robbery, is the first member of the gang to appear in the episode. Smirking in his prison jump suit when he speaks with the detectives, Burdett mockingly refers to the protesters as "Brave young students," adding, "Their idea of living dangerously was to spend the night in the faculty lounge and call it a sit-in. Tom [another member of the gang] proposed our 'action'—that's how they talked. All

the big mouths decided it was time to study for finals.” Burdett shares an indifference toward the cause with one of the detectives sitting across from him. Both Burdett and Detective Logan faked an interest in the protest’s politics for their own selfish reasons: sex and, in Burdett’s case, money. Both Logan’s and Burdett’s experiences cast doubt on the motives of the majority of sixties protesters. Burdett’s observation that most student protesters did not have the nerve to act on their convictions suggests true believers in the movement were few and far between. At the trial, Burdett testifies Forrest was one of those true believers and that she was “all hot to strike a blow against the war machine.”

Next on the stand is Forrest’s more timid peer, William Goodwin. A professor of comparative literature at City College, Goodwin knew Forrest and convicted accomplice, Margaret Pauley, when they were all students together at Columbia. He tries to hide his connection but eventually confesses that he was the one who put the bag with the money and the gun from the robbery in the safety deposit box, periodically taking money out for Forrest and Pauley until the bank installed video cameras in its vault and he was too nervous to continue. He seems like a milquetoast, but later in the episode Goodwin has an unexpected chance at martyrdom.

McCoy, expecting a routine examination, is stunned when, called to the witness stand, Goodwin refuses to testify against Forrest. When McCoy presses him, Goodwin jumps to his feet and cries, “What I remember is the United States government sending half a million troops to fight in a war it had already decided it couldn’t win! ...I remember the National Guard killing four college students whose only crime was protesting the illegal invasion of Cambodia!” The

judge calls for him to be removed from the courtroom on a contempt charge, prompting Goodwin to retort, “I cite this court with contempt!”³⁵

Goodwin’s testimony serves his purpose, throwing the case into disarray, and forcing the prosecutors to use old, unwarranted FBI wiretaps. The tapes cannot be presented in court, but Kincaid and McCoy discover that Forrest played a much more active role in the robbery than they had suspected. She bought the guns for the robbery, and she used a walkie-talkie to warn her compatriots that the cop was approaching, thus allowing the other member of the gang, Tom Rudisill, to get in position to shoot the unsuspecting officer. Armed with this new, illegally gained understanding of the crime, they confront Forrest’s old friend, Pauley.

Even more outspoken than Kunstler, Pauley is the most vocal defender of Forrest’s actions. She herself was on the run for over a decade before being caught in 1983. Two years out of jail on parole, Pauley still believes in the righteousness of the gang’s actions. Shooting the cop was a mistake, one she blames on her male counterparts in the gang. Still, she argues, “We were trying to save lives. Do you know how many people were being killed every day in Vietnam?”

Pauley remains loyal to Forrest, although the news Forrest has been giving money to conservative political groups shakes her confidence in her old friend. The prosecutors manage to convince Pauley that Forrest implicated Goodwin as part of the conspiracy. “She says Billy bought the guns?” Pauley and Forrest refer to Professor Goodwyn as Billy, belying his position as a hanger-on, driven mainly by his adoration for Forrest. “If he got within 10 miles of a gun store, it was only because he wanted to be near Susan. He loved her.” Pauley bursts into tears and adds, “So did I!” Her use of the past-tense—“did” instead of “do”—marks the tipping point

³⁵ In the next scene the district attorneys are rolling their eyes at Goodwin’s performance, suggesting, I hope, that the episode’s writers cited themselves with contempt at employing the overused line.

of the episode. Finally, Pauley is convinced that, as Kincaid tells her, “Susan Forrest isn’t one of you anymore.” With tears in her eyes, she testifies against Forrest, damning her old friend.³⁶

When Kunstler reaches out for a plea bargain, Kincaid suggests they push for an even stricter punishment than they had offered Forrest at the beginning of the episode, but McCoy refuses. He proposes the original offer, manslaughter one, which Forrest and Kunstler accept. The minimum sentence is eight years. After Forrest and Kunstler leave, Kincaid turns questioningly to McCoy, wondering why he did not push for a harsher penalty. McCoy’s reply closes the episode. “She’ll be in jail until 2003. I think the sixties should finally be over by then.”

Remnants of the Sixties

What does it mean for a period to be “over,” as McCoy suggests? Periodizing by cultural and historical developments rather than by the calendar, McCoy resembles many historians in his loose dating of an era of ostensibly fixed duration. Indeed, the robbery occurred in 1971; the episode itself is not alone in American culture or history writing in using “the sixties” as a shorthand for the generational shifts in social behavior and the related protest movements.

McCoy’s sarcastic closing remark that “the sixties should finally be over by” 2003 suggests, “Shouldn’t the dissenting emotions of the sixties still present in people like Pauley and Goodwin be gone even by now? After all, it is over for all of us.” Throughout the episode, he and

³⁶ Though the episode begins with the discovery of long-lost physical evidence, the case ultimately hinges on the investigators using Forrest’s relationships against her. As Donald Rackin points out, evidence and observation are critical for Alice’s journey. “The final chapter of [*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*] is called appropriately ‘Alice’s Evidence,’ and the subtitle of all [*Through the Looking Glass*] is *and what Alice found there*. Both titles underscore the fact that Alice gains the evidence necessary to impel her to end her threatening dreams. In order to survive, Alice—like the orderly Charles Dodgson—must create a meaningful world out of the morally unintelligible void.” The goal in any given episode of *Law & Order* is to mete out and appropriately punish immoral acts. This project is carried out with more doubt and ambiguity than *Dagnet* and other older television procedurals, but the process is nevertheless respected with the same certainty, suggesting meaning and morality are not impossibly unintelligible. Donald Rackin, “Blessed Rage: Lewis Carroll and the Modern Quest for Order,” from Carroll, 401. Originally published in Edward Guiliano, ed., *Lewis Carroll, a Celebration: Essays on the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Birth of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson* (New York: C.N. Potter, 1982).

others continually remind their younger colleagues that “it was a different time.” Radical protest was a characteristic of American life in the sixties that no longer exists in 1994. Further, they imply that there is no reason for such protests to exist, and America is better off without it. Back then, from McCoy’s viewpoint, Richard Nixon was abusing power and America was fighting an unjust war in Vietnam. Now, such problems are long gone.

Other than Kunstler, all of the radicals are *former* radicals; at least, even if they retain their political views, they are no longer motivated to the level of radical action they carried out in the sixties. *Law & Order* thus engages with a popular question in the historiography on the sixties—where did all those radicals go? The five people connected to the crime provide five different models of what might have happened to people involved in radical activism in the late sixties and early seventies.

- 1.) **Violent death:** Tom Rudisill, the man who actually shot the cop, died two weeks after the robbery in a shootout with police.
- 2.) **Never a true-believer:** Sam Burdett was arrested as an accomplice and remains in prison, where he tells the detectives, Logan and Briscoe, he participated in the robbery purely for financial gain.
- 3.) **Ivory tower:** William Goodwin, who helped hide the money after the robbery, is a professor of comparative literature whose work contains shades of his protest days.
- 4.) **Changed beliefs:** Susan Forrest in her new life as a suburban mom is happily contributing to the Republican Party.
- 5.) **Torch carrier:** Margaret Pauley is the only remaining participant who remains outspoken about the same issues she fought for a quarter century before. However, when

Forrest's capture brings the authorities to her door, she seems battle worn and far removed from her former activism.

Rudisill is dead. Burdett remains in jail for refusing to testify, and, for his outburst on the witness stand, Professor Goodwin is immediately arrested. Not only does the system apparently disappear him for his antics—he never appears again in the episode—his behavior is ultimately futile; he cannot save Forrest. McCoy and his fellow lawyers mock him for too little radicalism, too late.

Even before his moment of bravery in the courtroom, the cops laugh the professor off as a weakling as they investigate his background. “Some radical hero!” chortles Briscoe. “Yeah!” agrees Logan. “His girlfriends take out an armored car. Here’s his contribution to the revolution - *The Whale is Red: A Neo-Marxist Interpretation of Moby Dick*.” For the two cops—two plain-spoken, likable, relatable characters—Goodwin’s scholarship is utterly meaningless, except for the suggestion of un-American-ness implied by the words “red” and “Marxist.” After a quick glance at the title, Logan tosses Goodwin’s book aside.³⁷ The professor’s minor role in his friend’s actions as well as his chosen occupation are implied as “unmanly” by the show’s two best pundits on masculinity. “His girlfriends” may have been doing very bad things, but at least they had “manly” courage of their convictions. Goodwin risked nothing for his beliefs. Academic, ivory tower radicalism is dismissed as empty and unthreatening. Here, and not for the last time, the episode implies radicalism undermines traditional gender roles, one more way dissent threatens American life.

³⁷ I would like to see a *Law & Order* spinoff where Detective Logan reads *The Whale is Red*, joins the Communist Party USA, and works to bring about a Marxist revolution from inside the justice system. The title, obviously, would be *N.Y.P.D. Red*.

Forrest's Changed Beliefs

Forrest is now a harmless housewife living under an assumed identity, just as her real-life counterpart, Katherine Ann Power, had done. She emerged from the wild forests to the tame Westchester suburbs. Her first line of the episode is uttered before she realizes two detectives are standing in her kitchen. "Who wants pasta for dinner?" she sings out cheerily to her husband and son. Even Forrest's married name, Levitan, sounds like Levittown, the brand name of the suburban neighborhoods William Levitt developed after World War II, a symbol of post-War suburbanization. District Attorney Schiff sums up her domestication: "Now she's Den Mother of the Year. She bakes cookies for the Little League." Media coverage of Power's emergence used similar signifiers; almost every story emphasized that she was a mother, a wife, and an excellent cook who had settled in a small town.³⁸

Once a fierce participant of the protest movement, Forrest's retreat into the peaceful obscurity of American affluence is reminiscent of the transformation of one of Kunstler's Chicago Trial defendants, Jerry Rubin.³⁹ In the eighties, Rubin declared himself a Yuppie, invested in Apple, and proclaimed, "Wealth creation is the real American Revolution."⁴⁰ Forrest has suburbanized geographically and thus ideologically; McCoy reports that Forrest's "checkbook reads like a who's who of conservative causes." Her transformation is similar to that of former radicals who began supporting conservative causes, like Black Panther founder

³⁸ See for example Timothy Egan, "A Conscience Haunted by a Radical's Crime," *New York Times*, September 17, 1993; and Jane Meredith Adams, "The Fugitive Former Radical Katherine Power's 2 Decades on the Run-from FBI and from Her Conscience," *Chicago Tribune*, September 24, 1993.

³⁹ The Nixon administration tried Rubin and seven other defendants for conspiracy, inciting to riot, and other charges related to the protests in Chicago during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. The trial, which the radical defendants repeatedly disrupted with various acts of protest, resulted in several convictions, later overturned on appeal. John Schultz, *The Chicago Conspiracy Trial* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993).

⁴⁰ Martin Walker, "Breakfast in Amerika; From Sixties Rebel to Wall Street Buccaneer, Jerry Rubin Summed up the Story of Modern America," *The Guardian* (November 30, 1994), T8. This article is an obituary; Rubin died at the age of 56 after being struck by a car.

Eldridge Cleaver, who ran for Senate as a Republican in 1986, and New Left writer David Horowitz, who renounced his Leftism and supported Ronald Reagan in the eighties.⁴¹ The now-politically-inactive Forrest has transformed into the silent majority, a group to whom Nixon often appealed in his speeches, who watched the student protest movement at home on television with growing consternation.⁴²

Margaret Pauley, Torch Carrier

After Forrest is captured, the focus during the trial portion of the episode shifts to her friend, Margaret Pauley. She, like Kunstler, remains a radical long after the sixties, albeit one who the justice system has already prosecuted. Far from legitimizing the activities of sixties radicals, Pauley and Kunstler embody the target of McCoy's efforts to extinguish the lingering cinders of sixties radicalism.

These two "Torch Carriers" speak on Forrest's behalf. Kunstler argues Forrest was fighting for a worthy cause, and the fact that she is now a wife and mother proves that she has repented of her mistakes, though not her motives. Where Kunstler sees a healthy transformation, Pauley suspects Forrest is merely donning a disguise. She remembers Forrest as a loyal friend and a true believer, someone who, like Pauley, has not changed. Pauley only turns on Forrest when the prosecutor, McCoy, convinces her that Forrest has sold out their friend by admitting Professor Goodwin bought the guns that were used in the robbery and shooting.

⁴¹ David Horowitz and Peter Collier, "Lefties for Reagan; We Have Seen the Enemy and He is Not Us," *Washington Post Magazine*, March 17, 1985, 8.

⁴² Matthew Lassiter explains who this Silent Majority actually was in *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). For an excellent narrative history of Nixon's political rise and rhetoric in the sixties, see Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008). As the subtitle suggests, Perlstein convincingly argues that the political style of Nixon (and later Reagan) helped bring about a more politically fractured nation even before the emergence of the culture wars.

The episode suggests Forrest, like Power and unlike Pauley, is no longer dangerous because she has taken up the responsibilities of a traditional housewife. Radicalism remains alive in Pauley, even after serving a prison sentence, and even after so much time has passed. Pauley is never quite safe because she is never quite “normal.”

In Pauley’s first appearance on screen, she is busy in what an on-screen graphic tells viewers is a “Women’s Community Garden.” She is working the soil, surrounded by flowers, stalks of corn, and white rail fences; Alice might call it “the loveliest garden you ever saw.”⁴³ As the camera rotates to follow her movements, it reveals that the garden is bordered by looming brick buildings. The sound of traffic in the background confirms that she is in the middle of the city. In the character’s second appearance, she is again surrounded by greenery—the house plants in her apartment. She sips a cup of coffee with a blue horizon at her back, but it is paint on a kitchen wall, not the sky. She is trying to create a pastoral life in the middle of New York City. Perhaps her parole limits her movements. She is trapped in the city long after Forrest has fled to the suburbs. Pauley is in the wrong place, just as she is in the wrong time.

Having served her time, she remains unrepentant, and thus she poses a more complicated problem for the servants of law and order. She still retains radical sentiments which she feels justify her specific actions as well as antiwar radicalism in general. “We were trying to save lives,” she tells the investigating detectives in the community garden. “Do you know how many people were being killed every day in Vietnam?” The episode never attempts to counter Pauley’s position by offering a justification for the Vietnam War. Instead, her point is easily ignored, dismissed as the ranting of an angry, aging radical stuck in a moment in time that has long since

⁴³ Carroll, 10.

passed. Instead of a protest sign, she is now found holding a bucket and a trowel, and Logan taunts her: “Who you saving now? I mean, do I need a bulletproof vest?” She has no retort.

There is another shade of Pauley’s radicalism which is ultimately addressed and nullified. In her initial appearance, she blames the “macho creeps” in the quartet for the shooting. Her seething hatred of men implies that she is a radical feminist. Subtly, though never explicitly, the episode also indicates Pauley is a lesbian. Her last name, the diminutive suffix added to a male name, as well as her short haircut, contrasted with Forrest’s long curls, suggest an ambiguous gender. Burdett hints to the detectives that Pauley had a sexual relationship with the late Tom Rudisill, but now she detests the late gunman. “May he rot in hell,” she proclaims at the mention of his name, seeming to condemn all men along with him. In her first scene in the community garden, a woman looks on with concern as Pauley talks to the cops. Later, when McCoy and Kincaid visit Pauley in her home, the same woman is there, exchanging worried glances with Pauley, serving her a cup of coffee, and standing by Pauley’s side as she talks with the lawyers. The woman remains unnamed and never speaks, but she seems to occupy the place Forrest once held in Pauley’s life and heart. In the moment of her defeat as she finally agrees to testify against Forrest, Pauley acknowledges to the attorneys that she loved Forrest. For the first time, Pauley appears in this scene without her partner by her side, symbolizing her submission to authority at the expense of both her long-held political beliefs and her heart’s desires. It is an Orwellian fate, reminiscent of Winston Smith’s at the conclusion of *1984*; Pauley chooses to submit to the state over helping the person she once loved.⁴⁴ Unlike *1984*, *Law & Order*’s audience is positioned through its long association with the main characters to see Pauley’s submission as just.

⁴⁴ “Under the shade of the chestnut tree, I sold you and you sold me.” George Orwell, *1984* (London: Secker and Warburg, London, 1949).

Pitted against *Law & Order*'s familiar band of protagonists, Pauley, Forrest, and even the celebrity guest-star Kunstler cannot escape the negative connotation of their antagonistic position. The dominant reading of this story is inherently oppositional to their perspective, so even a viewer entirely sympathetic to their anti-Vietnam cause will likely struggle to relate to their side in the story.⁴⁵ Subtly, *Law & Order* brings into question the integrity of the sixties protest movement in retrospect. The career criminal, Burdett, is a phony and a cynic. Professor Goodwin's hesitancy to fully commit coupled with the genuine transformation of Forrest's politics seem to suggest that, indeed, Pauley's dedication was uncommon even among the most active in the student protest movement.

Kunstler, though, is not destroyed by the events of the episode. Any significant character transformation in a real world character would disrupt the episode's realism. Still, because the case is related to the famous trial he called his "personal Rubicon," the eventual acquittal of the Chicago Seven, his defeat in the fictional Forrest case neuters Kunstler as a radical force.⁴⁶ Not only does he lose, but in humbly accepting a plea deal, Kunstler surrenders. Ultimately, other than his inescapable celebrity, he seems no different from any other defense attorney McCoy has crossed swords with on *Law & Order*.⁴⁷ A brief examination of Kunstler's career will help

⁴⁵ Stuart Hall proposed a range of ways an audience could decode a cultural work. This range could be divided into three broad categories: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (Birmingham, Eng.: Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1973).

⁴⁶ William M. Kunstler and Sheila Isenberg, *My Life As a Radical Lawyer* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Pub, 1994), 42-43.

⁴⁷ Kunstler was the first of only five people to appear in *Law & Order* as themselves. Two of the others are mayors, Rudolph Giuliani (2000) and Michael Bloomberg (two episodes in 2004). The other two instances are fairly random cameos. Comedian Larry Miller appeared as himself in 2003 (after having played two other roles previously on the series) in an episode about a stand-up comic (not Miller) charged with child molestation. And actor Robert Culp appeared in a 1997 episode set in Los Angeles.

explain why he appeared on the episode, and further reveal the show's ideology as it relates to sixties radicalism.

William Kunstler

Law & Order cast Kunstler, like many other celebrity cameos, to get a little attention for his guest appearance.⁴⁸ As arguably the most famous defense attorney in New York City, it made sense within the realism of the show that he would appear at some point. The radical and historical connotations he embodied added to the episode's story about remnants of sixties radicalism appearing in the nineties as if by time machine. The real life Kunstler was one of those remnants, and his character aligns with the memory of who he was at the 1969 Chicago Conspiracy trial at the beginning of his fame.⁴⁹

Kunstler gave show business a try in the last few years of his life. The radical lawyer was never shy about getting in front of a camera to draw attention to his latest case or his latest cause. He had always been a quick-thinking improviser both in the courtroom and in front of the media, so it was an easy step to performing on screen and stage. He played a lawyer in Oliver Stone's 1991 film, *The Doors*, a racist judge in Spike Lee's 1992 *Malcolm X*, and himself in Ron

⁴⁸ NBC publicized Kunstler's guest appearance and newspapers including the *New York Times* and the *USA Today* reported his television acting debut ahead of the episode. For example, Brozan, Nadine. "Chronicle: William Kunstler makes connections in the course of his television acting debut," *New York Times*, October 18, 1994, and Matt Roush, "A radically good 'Law and Order,'" *USA Today*, October 19, 1994. Kunstler benefited from the bump in exposure too; the *Law & Order* appearance came about a month after the release of his autobiography, *My Life as a Radical Lawyer*.

⁴⁹ *Law & Order* dared to bring Kunstler in despite the baggage that came with him. Toward the end of his life, Kunstler only became more controversial. Throughout the eighties he provoked more public antipathy with his defense of Gotti, Long Island Rail Road shooter Colin Ferguson, and accused Central Park rapist Yusef Salaam. Kunstler could not keep Salaam out of jail, and would not live to see Salaam's conviction vacated in 2002 through DNA evidence and another man's confession. Throughout 1994, Kunstler had worked on the defense of Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman and other co-conspirators tied to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and later convicted for a plot to blow up a series of New York City landmarks. This episode references none of those recent cases. It avoids any discussion of Kunstler's controversial body of work, other than a brief jab at him for his tendency to seek publicity.

Howard's 1994 journalism drama, *The Paper*. He even dabbled in stand-up comedy, building up a small arsenal of lawyer jokes that he tried out in a few Manhattan comedy clubs.

He was 75 when he appeared in "White Rabbit." Kunstler only has a few scenes, most of them spent haggling with the prosecutors, the show's heroes. His best scene comes in the courtroom when he playfully undermines a defense witness's credibility. Kunstler has listened politely from his seat. His glasses are propped haphazardly on the top of his head, right on the spot where, as old photos testify, his scalp and his scraggly hairline have been deadlocked for decades. His turn comes and he energetically rises from his chair, revealing his gangly form. Slipping off his watch and holding it up, he wryly asks the witness, "If I were to give you this watch, would you testify the judge was present at the robbery?!" The prosecutor objects, and the judge chides the defense attorney, growling "Mr. Kunstlerrrrr!" The shaggy, grey-haired attorney flashes a Cheshire cat grin, saunters back to his seat, and chirps, "Thank you your honor. I would have hated to lose it!" Kunstler's character is crafty, aged, but still the same trickster as the real William Kunstler who first rose to national fame in the tumultuous Chicago Conspiracy Trial of 1969-70. The watch, like the White Rabbit's in *Alice in Wonderland*, is yet another reference to time. Kunstler still believes he has time to bring about radical change in America, but events in the episode prove otherwise.

In retrospect, by the date of Forrest's fictional crime, 1971, the New Left that arose in the early sixties and coalesced around the war was nearing the end of its peak. In 1968 the student protest movement reached the height of its influence on American politics and life. That was the year when, following the Tet Offensive, a majority of Americans answered yes to Gallup's poll

of whether the Vietnam War was a mistake.⁵⁰ That was also the year of the Chicago protests and riots, where so many diverse interests suddenly came together in opposition to the Democratic Party's failure to nominate an anti-war candidate. Ironically, in prosecuting the Chicago Eight as a collective the following year for conspiracy to incite riots at the convention, the U.S. government unwittingly cobbled together disparate interests into another unifying moment for the radical movement. Black Panther co-founder Bobby Seale's case was eventually tried separately, turning the Chicago Eight into the Chicago Seven. The severance of the only black defendant foreshadowed the fragmentation that would beset the protest movement, as it increasingly split along identity lines—gender, race, sexuality.⁵¹ Opposition to the government, including the justice system, was one area where all radicals could agree, but aversion to the system was not enough common ground to tie radicals together, except perhaps in Kunstler's philosophy. After the Chicago trial, Kunstler defended radicals of all stripes, finding in all of his cases a common enemy in the inherently unjust legal system.⁵² Most of his fellow radicals were chasing increasingly narrow interests.

While activists such as Kunstler would insist radicalism lasted much longer, McCoy's perspective seems more closely aligned with collective memory.⁵³ The Vietnam War *was* wrong, and Nixon *was* a bad guy, but by 1975, both were finished; looking back as this episode did, it

⁵⁰ William L. Luch and Peter W. Sperlich, "American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam," *The Western Political Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (March 1979), 21-44.

⁵¹ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987).

⁵² "[The law] is, in fundamental essence, nothing more than a method of control created by a socioeconomic system determined, at all costs, to perpetuate itself, by all and any means necessary, for as long as possible." William Kunstler, *The Emerging Police State: Resisting Illegitimate Authority* (New York: Ocean Press, 2004), 38.

⁵³ Kunstler became more radical *after* the Chicago trial. After that experience, Kunstler saw the system itself as his greatest enemy. In the 1970s, he was involved with high-profile radical clients, like American Indians at Pine Ridge and rioting prisoners at Attica. In the 1980s, as radicalism declined in America, he increasingly took on *any* high-profile clients, from Mafia Don John Gotti to convicted (and, years after Kunstler died, vindicated) rapist Yusef Salaam. For Kunstler the greater evil was always the system itself. Kunstler and Isenberg, 42-43.

was reasonable to expect the protest movement to disappear at the same time. Kunstler's post-sixties work, the various radical groups he was involved in, and the myriad other tiny protest movements faded from the scene in this narrative of American history. "It's the way things were," says McCoy. It is not the way things are.

In his book, *The Whole World is Watching*, Todd Gitlin argues the news media inherently portrayed the student movement as a threat, leading most American viewers to perceive them negatively.⁵⁴ Thus, the movement was increasingly marginalized. As Antonio Gramsci (a key influence on Gitlin's argument) might put it, the hegemony succeeded through the media in persuading a majority that the radical movement was a danger. The media helped persuade Americans that law and order was a proper antidote to the dangerous disorder created by the radicals.

This *Law & Order* episode and the series in general continue to promote a Nixonian ideology in opposition to radical dissent. Every week, the criminal justice system is emphasized as the rightful solution to all social disorder, including the radical energies remembered from the 1960s and 70s that, by the 90s, seemed so absent from American culture. Police procedurals such as *Law & Order* serve the dominant ideology, reassuring viewers that the system remains at work, despite its own flaws and despite the efforts of radicals like Kunstler and Forrest.

Nixon V. Kunstler

History and memory recall the Chicago Conspiracy trial as a flashpoint for sixties protests against, broadly, the Vietnam War, racism, and American culture. But Nixon and his administration were not primarily interested in thwarting the specific goals of the protesters so

⁵⁴ Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

much as they wanted to quell dissent itself. Abbie Hoffman's oft-quoted observation, "Conspiracy? Hell, we couldn't agree on lunch!" indicates the divergent beliefs and goals of the Chicago group. It was not the specific goals of the protesters that the Nixon era government wanted to thwart but their methods and, more importantly, the very act of radical dissent itself. The Chicago Conspiracy trial was one of many the administration instituted against the New Left, particularly anti-war and black power advocates. Many of the charges collapsed in trial, while many others cases (including the Chicago trial convictions) were eventually thrown out due to illegal government behavior. Still, the administration successfully undermined radical movements simply by forcing them to spend time, money, and energy for their self-defense.⁵⁵

Nixon, both as a historical figure and a symbol, casts a long shadow over this episode as the enemy of the protesters and their actions. He is mentioned only once, but he embodies the opposition targeted by the protesters. That is just how presidential candidate Nixon would have wanted to be perceived as he sought to portray himself as the solution to the chaos that had unfolded while the Democratic Party controlled the White House. In contrast to the wild Democratic campaign, Nixon's road to the nomination was smooth and peaceful from the primaries to the convention, which was held in a carefully controlled Miami three weeks before the debacle in Chicago. His convention address continued to illustrate an image a largely peaceful, civil nation—he would later use the term "silent majority"—threatened by a small group of misbehaving radicals:⁵⁶

As we look at America, we see cities enveloped in flame. We hear sirens in the night. We see Americans fighting on distant battlefields abroad. We see Americans hating each other; fighting each other; killing each other at home.

⁵⁵ Robert Justin Goldstein, *Political Repression in Modern America, 1870 to the Present* (Cambridge/London: Schenckman Publishing Co./Two Continents Publishing Group, Ltd., 1978), 487-88.

⁵⁶ Nixon's first use of the term "silent majority" came in his "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam," on November 3, 1969.

And as we see and hear these things, millions of us cry out in anguish: Did we come all this way for this? Did American boys die in Normandy and Korea and in Valley Forge for this?

Listen to the answers to those questions.

It is another voice, it is a quiet voice in the tumult of shouting. It is the voice of the great majority of Americans—the forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators. They're not racists or sick; they're not guilty of the crime that plagues the land; they are black, they are white; they're native born and foreign born; they're young, they're old.⁵⁷

Nixon's speech, as such nomination speeches typically do, attempted to articulate a picture of a nation that encompassed his hoped-for supporters. Nixon explicitly excludes protestors and shouters along with criminals and racists from his imagined body of good Americans.

Continuing the speech, after vowing to reshape America's foreign policy and reappraise its strategy in Vietnam, Nixon turns to the subject of law and order. "So let us have order in America," says Nixon, "not the order that suppresses dissent and discourages change but the order which guarantees the right to dissent and provides the basis for peaceful change." This might sound like an olive branch to protestors, but the hoped-for peaceful change ostensibly disqualifies radical protestors who Nixon has already described as not peaceful. Nixon next calls for a respect of the justice system, for the courts and those who enforce the laws. He claims to support civil rights but only on the understanding that the most important civil right of every American is to be free of violence. In short, Nixon promises to defend the nation against the kinds of violence he suggests radical protest inevitably creates, the kind of violence portrayed in this episode of *Law & Order*.

Two years later the Cambodian Incursion sparked the largest wave of protests yet on campuses from Cornell to Kent State to San Francisco. As the anti-war movement grew

⁵⁷ Richard M. Nixon, "Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech," August 8, 1968.

increasingly radical, Nixon continued to draw a clear line between the protesters who were threatening the safety of the nation and the Silent Majority:

All over this land we see a new doctrine developing in recent years, that if the cause is one you believe in, and if the cause is right, any means is right to serve that cause. You can bomb a building. You can burn a building. You can engage in illegal conduct. You can not only demonstrate peacefully, but you can shout four-letter obscenities in a crowd. You can do all these things and the cause justifies it...

Let me tell you something. I have news for you. That isn't a majority of young America. I have faith in young America, and I will tell you why. Because the majority of young Americans, they want progress for this country, they want peace for this country, they may not agree with every program that we have, but they also recognize the way to progress and the way to peace is not through engaging in violence.⁵⁸

Nixon's speeches suggested a slippery slope from peaceful protest to violence.

Ultimately, *Law & Order's* prosecutor, McCoy, sides with this position. McCoy may have believed in the anti-war cause, but, as Nixon argues, the kind of protest Forrest and Pauley carried out is unproductive and dangerous. McCoy starts off with a basic sympathy for Forrest and her position, but after Kunstler's repeated references to the Vietnam War, Professor Goodwin's courtroom scene, and Margaret Pauley's stonewalling, he gradually loses his patience. He destroys them all on his mission to pursue justice, thus fulfilling Nixon's strategy of using the law to dismantle dissent.

Of course, through the memory of Watergate, Nixon is an odd symbol to compare to Assistant District Attorney Jack McCoy. His legacy is inherently negative, and "White Rabbit" references this through Schiff's disgusted snort, "Nixon!" as the lawyers discuss the illegal wiretapping done by both the Nixon White House and the F.B.I. But in the next breath Schiff

⁵⁸ Richard Nixon, Stump speech in Grand Forks, South Dakota (October 19, 1970). Reprinted in *Richard Nixon: Speeches, Writings, Documents*, ed. by Rick Perlstein (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 213-215, 217.

reaches for the phone to track down key evidence contained in the records of those wiretaps.

Nixon and the F.B.I. may have gone too far outside the law, but they targeted the right people.

In the introduction to his autobiography Kunstler, with typical grandiosity, proclaims that the Chicago Conspiracy Trial “would be a turning point in America’s history, and it was up to me and Len Weinglass to keep the faith—to exonerate the defendants and validate the politics and values of the sixties.”⁵⁹ Those are again the stakes in “White Rabbit.” Kunstler’s guest appearance makes that symbolic connection, raising the stakes. His defeat, though fictional, is nationally televised, and both the values and the methods of the sixties radicalism are marginalized beneath the greater goal of maintaining order. It is Nixon over Kunstler in a knockout.

Conclusions

By 1994, the year “White Rabbit” aired, the problem of Vietnam was waning in Americans’ minds. When Margaret Pauley was captured in 1983 America was in the midst of a series of films offering a deeply cynical memory of America’s Vietnam adventure. In the mid-eighties Hollywood presented the Vietnam War not only as a military and political mistake, but as a moral debacle for its impact on the American men who fought in it.⁶⁰ By the time Forrest was arrested in 1994, two primetime dramas set in Vietnam, *China Beach* (ABC, 1988-91) and

⁵⁹ Kunstler, *My Life as a Radical Lawyer*, 3.

⁶⁰ Eighties films depicting the Vietnam War that did well at the box office include *Platoon* (the 3rd highest grossing film in the country of those released in 1986), *Good Morning Vietnam* (4th in 1987), and Sylvester Stallone’s Rambo films (*First Blood* was 13th in 1982, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* was 2nd in 1982). Box office stats retrieved from <http://boxofficemojo.com/>. Other films about Vietnam received critical acclaim, including Academy Award Best Picture winners *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Platoon*, and Academy Award Best Picture nominees *Apocalypse Now* (1980) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989).

Tour of Duty (CBS, 1987-90), had come and gone.⁶¹ *Forrest Gump*, on the other hand, ruled the box office in 1994, offering a slightly more sentimental look at the Vietnam War. That story's Forrest meets his two best friends and becomes a national hero in the war.⁶² One of his friends is killed and the other loses his legs in Vietnam, but from the broad perspective of the film, these are setbacks from which Forrest will learn and grow, just as the Vietnam war is a misstep, but one from which America itself learns and grows.

Margaret Pauley's basic argument—the Vietnam War was a mistake—would be familiar and acceptable for most of the audience in 1994. “Americans now agree that the long U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia was a disaster for America,” pronounced a *New York Times* editorial in 1991. *Forrest Gump* does not dispute this assessment but neither does it dwell on it. Both Forrests, Gump and Susan, move on with their lives after Vietnam, unlike Pauley and Kunstler.

The *New York Times* quote above came from an editorial on the 1990-91 Gulf War.⁶³ The editorial agreed with the Bush administration's repeated assertions that the Gulf War would not be another Vietnam, and indeed, the swift American victory put that debate quickly to rest. In the wake of the American rout of Iraq, the failure of Vietnam felt distant, just as Kunstler and Pauley's dissent felt anachronistic in the episode. Even the die-hard radical, Pauley, draws a difference between “then” and “now.” She never equates the current government with those in power during the Vietnam War. “Why are you doing this to us?” she asks McCoy. “The real criminals killed 50,000 American boys and over a million Vietnamese and they've never been in

⁶¹ *China Beach* won a Golden Globe in 1990 for best TV drama, and Dana Delaney won two Emmy's (1989 and 1992) for her performance in the show.

⁶² “Run, Forrest, Run!” Forrest Gump, like Susan Forrest, is also known for his running.

⁶³ Editorial, “Why the Gulf War is Not Vietnam,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1991.

a courtroom.” Not even Pauley sees a connection between the powers that sustained the Vietnam War and America’s power structure two decades later.

The nation and the government had righted itself. The First Gulf War, following closely on the heels of the stunningly abrupt end to the Cold War, marked a new period of optimism about America’s sturdy position on the world stage. Pundits and the public might disagree about how America should use its strength over the next decade, but few would argue against the fact that America was strong. So *Law & Order*’s depiction of the strength and stability of the New York City justice system as well as the solidification of the city’s socioeconomics parallels the position of the nation as a whole at the moment.

The episode suggests that radicalism’s defeat is ultimately desirable for the well-being of Americans. The young protesters in the sixties were too extreme in their actions, and the violence that resulted was their fault alone. It is the virtuous responsibility of the well-intentioned, hardworking people portrayed in *Law & Order* to use the legal system to diminish the threat of dissent. Their efforts ensure dissent does not threaten other well-intentioned, hardworking citizens, people like Officer Perella, the cop killed in “White Rabbit” when he stumbled onto the robbery. His widow brings McCoy his photo to remind the prosecutor—and the audience—that a man lost his life because of Forrest’s act of dissent.

Both in casting Kunstler to play himself and in crafting a story around a cold case from 1971, this episode of *Law & Order* re-sets the social upheaval of the sixties in the relative calm of the early nineties. With the benefit of hindsight, the authoritative protagonists accept the message of the sixties protesters that the Vietnam War was a mistake, but ultimately condemn radical dissent as a real and lasting danger to the nation. The Kunstler episode repeatedly implies times have changed, revealing the ideology of the series as a whole. America in the nineties is

more unsympathetic toward protest than it was in the sixties. The nation prefers peace and quiet, and *Law & Order* affirms that desire and reassures its audience that the police and the courts are hard at work maintaining order. The series promotes a vision of a justice system that may be relied upon to deal with disorder effectively so that the vast majority of well-behaved Americans may go about their lives confident in their own security. According to *Law & Order*, radical dissent was no longer acceptable. Times had changed.

Chapter 4

The Truth is Out There... and He Loves You: Depictions of Faith in *The X-Files* and *Touched by an Angel*

Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"

He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"

—Matthew 8:23-27¹

In the final decade of the 20th century, television remained the dominant communications medium in America. But the medium it had supplanted was still hanging around, and plenty of radio shows reached large nationwide audiences. At the end of the century, National Public Radio was carried on more than 700 stations across the country, reaching about 28 million listeners per week.² Meanwhile, the rising popularity of nationally syndicated talk radio personalities in the nineties meant that radio was, in a way, experiencing a resurgence as a national rather than a local medium.³ The most popular personalities—Laura Schlessinger, Howard Stern, and the ratings king, Rush Limbaugh—were all averaging 10 to 15 million weekly listeners at the end of the decade.⁴

Limbaugh's ratings in 1999 were about the same as they were in 1991; throughout the decade he remained the dominant radio voice for political conservatism. His was a crucial media

¹ *Holy Bible*, New International Version (Biblica, Inc., 2011), accessed March 1, 2015, <http://www.biblegateway.com/>

² Andrea Adelson, "The Business of National Public Radio: A New On-Line Venture Puts Local Stations on the Defensive," *New York Times*, April 5, 1999, C9.

³ Judith Michaelson, "Radio; the Decline of the Local Hero; You Have to Go National to Make it Big in Talk Radio. But is Anyone Going to Talk about Local Issues in this age of Syndication?" *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1998.

⁴ Jim Rutenberg, "Despite Other Voices, Limbaugh's Is Still Strong," *New York Times*, April 24, 2000, C1.

voice helping spread the message of the Newt Gingrich-led 1994 mid-term election conservative surge. The ongoing struggles between President Bill Clinton and powerful Congressional Republicans like Gingrich were the most visible political conflagrations of America's raging culture wars. Throughout the decade, Limbaugh was the most prominent media figure for the political right.

In his 1991 book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, James Davison Hunter attempted to explain the history and nature of America's culture wars.⁵ He described the cultural tension between conservative, religiously orthodox, traditionalists on one side and progressivists on the other. This tension manifested in various fields of conflict: family, education, arts, law, and electoral politics. The following year Pat Buchanan, a regular conservative candidate for President throughout the decade, gave an address to the Republican National Convention that would become known as his Culture War Speech.⁶ Using exactly the kind of rhetoric Hunter had described, he attacked candidate Bill Clinton as an opponent of "the Judeo-Christian values and beliefs upon which America was founded" who would support "radical feminism...abortion on demand... homosexual rights...women in combat units...environmental extremists." Limbaugh spoke with similar language on the radio all decade long, epitomizing the conservative culture war rhetoric.

The American culture wars at the end of the 20th century, with their varied conflicts, were themselves a short term consequence of a much deeper historical shift; over several centuries, Christianity had been in a slow decline as a dominant worldview in Western culture. That is not to argue that religion itself was in decline, but rather the long-held assumptions about God,

⁵ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991).

⁶ Patrick Buchanan, "Culture War Speech: Address to the Republican National Convention," August 17, 1992, accessed February 13, 2015, <http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/buchanan-culture-war-speech-speech-text/>.

human behavior, and even objective truth had slowly been eroding, chipped away after the Enlightenment by Darwin, Freud, and so many other influential thinkers. From this perspective, on one side of Hunter's culture wars were those who still yearned for fundamental religious principles to remain central in organizing cultural values. On the other side were those who rejected such orthodoxy as wrong. Thus, the culture wars frequently manifested as science versus religion. Strong belief on one side demanded a rejection of the other, or so it seemed.

While Limbaugh stoked the culture war fire with his conservative radio talk show in the middle of the day, another show attracted ten million listeners per week in the middle of the night. This show treated matters of faith, science, and everything in between and beyond with an open mind. It was not primarily a political show, and while it consistently discussed both faith and science, neither was it a combative show. Faith and science blended with the eclecticism of New Age spirituality and the wild wonder at the possibility that some science fictions might be facts. Show topics ranged from UFOs to time travel, and guests included scientists, priests, and psychics. Callers, usually unscreened, were welcomed, whatever their position. The host broadcast from his home, as he described it, somewhere in the Nevada desert.

This show was *Coast to Coast AM*. It began in 1984 and remains on the air in 2015. By the late 1990s it was syndicated on more than 400 radio stations across the country.⁷

* * *

On February 28, 1997, just after 1:00 am ET, *Coast to Coast AM*'s host and founder Art Bell begins his show in a state of excited agitation. Just that week Scottish researchers

⁷ Marc Fisher, "The Outer Limits: A Lone Voice in the Desert Lures 10 Million Listeners," *Washington Post*, March 29, 1998.

announced they had cloned a sheep, the first mammal copied from an adult cell.⁸ Bell is delighted at the guest he has lined up for the show to talk about this scientific development that is “as important as splitting the atom.”⁹

Frequently, Bell’s guests are, as most mainstream scientists would label them, pseudoscientists.¹⁰ Every once in a while, his guests are later discovered or admitted to be frauds. On the show, though he may sometimes question their theories, Bell does not question their credentials. They are presented as experts. Some shows are given up entirely to callers, who Bell treats with nearly the same amount of respect he gives to his guests. Callers might respond to Bell’s discussion of top news stories, but are welcome to talk about almost any topic they like: ghosts or life after death or dreams or quantum physics or alien ruins on the moon or Y2K fears or militant militias or the Bermuda Triangle or “super-fast” dial-up modems.

August 25, 1995: the night before Fox airs footage of a supposedly real Alien Autopsy, Bell invites aliens living on earth to call in to the show.¹¹

April 16, 1996: a man named “Bugs” calls to say he killed multiple Bigfoot creatures in 1973.¹²

June 13, 1997: a woman calls up to describe how she used a special hospital elevator to travel through time.¹³

July 28, 1997: Bell fields calls from animals who can talk.¹⁴

⁸ Rick Weiss, “Scottish Scientists Clone Adult Sheep; Technique’s Use with Humans is Feared,” *Washington Post*, February 24, 1997, A1.

⁹ Art Bell, *Coast to Coast AM*, February 28, 1997. Replayed on *Art Bell: Somewhere in Time*, January 22, 2011, accessed “Somewhere in Time Archive” on March 15, 2015, <http://sitarchive.com/?p=1532>.

¹⁰ Fisher.

¹¹ Art Bell, *Coast to Coast AM*, July 28, 1997. Replayed on *Art Bell: Somewhere in Time*, March 9, 2013.

¹² Art Bell, *Coast to Coast AM*, April 16, 1996. Replayed on *Art Bell: Somewhere in Time*, August 23, 2014.

¹³ Art Bell, *Coast to Coast AM*, June 13, 1997. Replayed on *Art Bell: Somewhere in Time*, December 13, 2014.

Bell has a deep voice—a classic radio voice. He is enthusiastic yet formal in both diction and delivery. He is friendly but consistently serious, and he almost always seems to accept his guests' and callers' testimonies. He wants “to help them get their story out, no matter how wild. Unless someone is dangerously misinforming my audience, that is not the role of this host. Let the audience decide.”¹⁵ Bell seems to believe much of what even his wildest guests say, and certainly everything he himself says. Some of his guests and many of his callers might not be for real, but the show *requires* that Bell is. There is never a hint of irony in *Coast to Coast AM* approach to bizarre and supernatural subject matter. Irony would ruin the show's aesthetic.

For the week Dolly the cloned sheep is revealed to the world, Bell welcomes a very respectable guest: Jesuit priest, geneticist, and bioethicist Kevin FitzGerald.¹⁶ Bell promises his audience that he will spend most of the three hour show talking to FitzGerald about cloning, although if he has time he will also discuss a recent story he saw about magnetic levitation. FitzGerald is a good guest who gamely answers all of Bell's questions, from the reasonable to the paranoid. Like a good teacher, he explains how DNA works. Patiently, he repeatedly reminds Bell that Dolly is better thought of as a “delayed identical twin” to its 6-year-old mother rather than a Xerox copy.

They move into the territory of ethics. Bell wonders, hypothetically, could an older man clone himself and harvest his clone's organs to keep himself alive longer? FitzGerald suggests it is more likely that humans will someday engineer animals to provide organs for humans, though that also raises ethical questions. Bell muses on the dangers of mixing human and animal DNA.

¹⁴ Art Bell, *Coast to Coast AM*, August 25, 1995. Replayed on *Art Bell: Somewhere in Time*, July 12, 2014.

¹⁵ Fisher.

¹⁶ As a marker of FitzGerald's respectability, the current Georgetown professor was recently named by Pope Francis to the Pontifical Council for Culture. “Pope Francis Names Jesuit Father Kevin FitzGerald to Pontifical Council for Culture,” August 5, 2014, accessed February 14, 2015, <http://jesuits.org/news-detail?TN=NEWS-20140805112058>.

FitzGerald downplays but does not dismiss his concerns. Bell wonders what Einstein's clone would be like. FitzGerald emphasizes the role of environment in human development. Bell asks if humans might try to genetically engineer an army of cloned super-soldiers. FitzGerald points out that there is strength in diversity, and that every soldier in such an army would share the same weakness which an enemy would surely exploit. As the second hour of the show begins, Bell takes a deep breath and asks the question he seems to have been saving. "Do clones have souls?" FitzGerald points out the same theological questions were asked of the first "test tube" baby. The two discuss the theological ramifications of cloning for a while.

Bell starts to mix in audience questions. One question comes in via fax, asking about whether intelligence is more genetically-based or environmentally-based. A second faxed question asks if a person made of cancer cells might presumably live forever, because cancer cells do not age. Almost halfway into the program Bell finally takes a call. A man in the navy, concerned about DNA data banking, might be risking his job for refusing to give a genetic specimen. A while later a caller wonders if the aging process could be slowed by mixing a man's blood with that of his young clone's. Most of America is sleeping through the show. The conversation moves along.

Culture Peaces

Coast to Coast AM, for all its strangeness, for all its appeal to paranoid insomniacs, suggests a peaceful, distant corner of the culture wars. Here, the conversation on both science and faith is regular, free-flowing, and non-combative. Hunter's *Culture Wars* sees no chance of reconciliation between the hardline traditionalists and the hardline progressives, but while their high-profile conflicts raged on into the 21st century, Art Bell was facilitating mostly pleasant

conversations with Jesuit geneticists, conspiracy theorists, environmental prophets of doom, and many, many others.

Coast to Coast AM was (and remains to this day, albeit slightly more political under Bell's successor, George Noory) a bizarre late night American novelty.¹⁷ It is a cultural consequence of the expansive, still mysterious continent, crossed every night by long-haul truckers who faithfully tune in to hear the ponderings of the nation's insomniacs. As an intersection of faith and science, New Age spirituality and science fiction, *Coast to Coast AM* suggests a happy alternative to the high strung anger of the culture wars.

Two of the most popular television dramas of the nineties deal with the issue of belief on God, occupying a similar space of cultural exchange to *Coast to Coast AM* where faith is not mocked but embraced. Both shows are untraditional dramas. Unlike the other shows examined in this dissertation, they do not fit neatly into a widely imitated genre with an extensive history. This allows a certain freedom of form which both shows employed to tell starkly different stories from most network television shows of the nineties.

One show, *Touched by an Angel*, leans heavily into Christian themes, promoting faith as America's answer to the family values problem Gingrich, Limbaugh and others diagnosed. *Touched by an Angel* presented a New Age-influenced take on angels so bereft of any specific doctrine that truly orthodox Christian theologians should have been crying foul. They did not, at least not in any way that made much of a public ripple. *Touched by an Angel's* audience loved the show, and fans embraced its overall message that faith was, indeed, the therapeutic salve needed to heal the fragmenting nation.

¹⁷ Noory has been accused by fans and even Bell himself of turning *Coast to Coast AM* into a more typical political talk show, but it remains very atypical. I would suggest the show's diminishing ratings (now closer to 2-3 million per week) are more the result of changes to the medium. As with television, late night radio users now have many more choices, like satellite radio or podcasts.

The other nineties show that focused on belief as its central theme, *The X-Files*, was more directly comparable to *Coast to Coast AM*. Its science fiction tale of an elaborate government conspiracy to hide the existence of aliens is an allegory for the struggle to believe in something supernatural in a world that treats such ideas as ridiculous. In *The X-Files*, the search for the existence of aliens is the search for the existence of God, and the show proposes that such a search could only be successful if science and faith worked in tandem.

These shows (as well as *Coast to Coast AM*) offer a solution for the culture wars schism between traditionalists and progressivists, negotiating a culture peace through a synthesis of science and religion, reason and faith. Each show constructs its synthesis on the basis of a simple question: what is truth? Seeking to answer this question, the central mission in *The X-Files* and *Touched by an Angel* make similar assumptions about the world with the traditionalists, but use scientific methods more in line with the approach associated with the progressivists. Objective truth is attainable and, with effort, can be perceived clearly, without ambiguity. The scientific process plays an important role in the pursuit of truth, because while feelings and intuition are sometimes helpful, they can just as easily mislead, requiring concrete facts for course correction. Significantly for the emotional impact of both shows, the search for truth in the form of angels and aliens is depicted unironically. Morality, like truth, is not relative; the search for truth is itself an inherently noble pursuit, and the discovery of truth is in the best interests of both the individual's soul and humanity's well-being. The world's fundamental problem is that it is filled with lies; the triumphant moments in both series come when truth is proven.

The two series diverge in both the nature of the world's lies and the resolution achieved when the characters expose these lies. In *Touched by an Angel*, the individuals believe a lie that God is not real and does not love them. The angels reveal themselves and thus reveal the

presence of a loving God, bringing the human character, and presumably most of its audience, to a psychic state of ease. The religion the angels offer is practical, not systematic—therapeutic, not theological.

Unease is the defining emotional state in *The X-Files*, because the main characters are never quite able to capture indisputable proof that they can show to the community. Unlike the saved characters in *Touched by an Angel*, a personal feeling of certainty is not enough for the protagonists in *The X-Files*. Truth, for them, is a complete systematic explanation for human life. The central tension of the drama continues because they never quite accomplish their goal of proving the truth to the world.

The X-Files: Wanting to Believe

The X-Files ran from 1993 to 2002 on Fox, spawning two feature films in 1998 and 2008. It was Fox's biggest hit since *The Simpsons*, surpassing the animated sitcom in the Nielsen Ratings in the middle of its run. The show follows two agents as they investigate the F.B.I.'s most bizarre cases, all of them containing a paranormal mystery. Agent Fox Mulder, played by David Duchovny, is a fervent believer in the existence of aliens and other supernatural phenomena. Agent Dana Scully, played by Gillian Anderson, is deeply skeptical of Mulder's beliefs, at least in the early seasons. Medically trained, Scully brings a scientific approach to their investigation, regularly proposing rational explanations to counter Mulder's wild theories. Scully = science and skepticism, Mulder = faith and belief.

The Mulder-Scully dynamic both suggests broadly the state of religion in American culture at the turn of the 21st century, and presents a vision of science and faith as not inherently contradictory but complementary. Over time, as Mulder and Scully become inseparable partners, their shared story suggests science and faith should work together.

The X-Files is a show about belief. When Scully first meets Mulder, finding him at work in his dark office, deep in the basement of the J. Edgar Hoover building, she notices a poster on the wall showing a flying saucer hovering over a tree line over the caption, “I WANT TO BELIEVE.” It is one of the classic icons from the series, always visible in Mulder’s office.

If this is Mulder’s mantra, why is it, “I want to believe”? Why not just, “I believe?” The phrase suggests desire, not certainty. Mulder cannot yet prove his beliefs to the scientist Scully and he will never be able to prove his beliefs to the world. Yet he retains his faith that if he keeps searching he will find the answers to his questions. But Mulder is not looking for “Just the Facts,” à la *Dragnet*’s stoic, procedural Joe Friday. Mulder is looking for meaning, both personal and philosophical. He wants to know about his past, but his questions also sound like classic questions of faith. Why did my sister disappear? Why did my father choose my sister and not me? Eventually and ultimately, Why are we here? The flying saucer in that poster is Mulder’s visible image of the invisible God, the answer to his questions.

Gradually, as Mulder and Scully unearth scraps of evidence of alien activity on earth, they begin to sketch out a story that suggests aliens may have been responsible for bringing life to the planet. In a monologue from the opening scenes of the sixth season finale which Scully voices over a visual montage of the history of life on earth, she asks, “Is there a plan, a purpose or a reason to our existence? ... Or will the mystery be revealed through a sign, a symbol, a revelation?”¹⁸ The last line is spoken over the scene of men coming across a piece of metal sticking out of the sand on the coast of Africa. In this episode and stretching into the first two episodes of the seventh season, Scully discovers that the metal is part of what appears to be an alien spaceship. The craft is imprinted with a Native American language which, when translated,

¹⁸ “Biogenesis,” *The X-Files*, season six, episode 22 (May 16, 1999).

contains writings from holy texts including the Bible and the Koran, as well as a map of the human genome. The aliens, then, are the source of the building blocks of both biology *and* religion. They are God. And, as series creator Chris Carter explains, the search for aliens on *The X-Files* is an allegory for the search for God. “Somewhere along the line,” Carter says, “I came to the conclusion that the show was really about the search for God. I think science is about the search for God; it just comes at it from a different angle than religion. But the show was equally about the difficulty to believe. And doubt.”¹⁹

That tension between science and faith Carter sought to negotiate through the show is one of the quintessential tensions of not only the 1990s but post-Enlightenment Western culture as whole. *The X-Files* captures it, adding urgency to the question of belief with an undercurrent of end-of-millennium fears of apocalypse. The end of the world looms, perhaps in 2012 as prophesied by the Mayans, perhaps at the turn of the century related somehow to the Y2K computer bug, or perhaps in a season finale.

However, even as the human race heads towards calamity, Mulder and Scully’s dogged search embodies hope. “I want to believe” soon applies to both characters. Scully wears a cross necklace throughout the series right into the final scene and wrestles with the Catholic beliefs of her family, incrementally embracing that faith even as she comes to accept the existence of aliens. Meanwhile, Mulder quickly comes to appreciate the value of Scully’s scientific skepticism in his own search for answers. By the second season premiere, he tells Scully, “Seeing is not enough. I should have something to hold onto, some solid evidence. I learned that

¹⁹ “*The X-Files: 1993-2002*,” *Entertainment Weekly*, October 25, 2013.

from you.”²⁰ He consistently relies on Scully’s expertise to lead him to the next piece of the weekly puzzle.

The final lines from the series explicitly state what the show had always been about. Mulder is frustrated that he has failed to prevent a future alien invasion that would be the end of humankind...the end of history. Scully asks Mulder about the poster, and then tells him she shares his belief. “Maybe there’s hope,” says Mulder.

The series ends with the pair holding each other in bed. *The X-Files*, then, is not about the clash between science and faith but the marriage of the two. This would be a difficult development for hardcore culture warriors to accept. But the two protagonists in *The X-Files* are never dismissive towards what culture war progressives would see as unscientific belief in the supernatural. Nor are they hostile to employing what culture war traditionalists might feel is anti-religious scientific inquiry. For all its darkness, *The X-Files* presented an incredibly optimistic vision of the potential for a union of science and faith. In fact, they transform each other for the better. Science makes faith stronger. Faith expands the possibilities of science.

Fans and Serialization

Most television series develop a loyal following if they are around long enough, but the fan cultures surrounding *Touched by an Angel* and *The X-Files* were frequently mentioned in media coverage of the shows. *Touched by an Angel* fans felt compelled to send testimonies of their emotional reaction to the show directly to its cast and production staff. *X-Files* fans interacted with the show in more typical ways, through episode guides and fan clubs, but they also found each other on the fledgling internet, speculating over the show’s minutiae on message boards. The online behavior of its most fervent fans foreshadowed the culture that would

²⁰ “Little Green Men,” *The X-Files*, season two, episode one (Fox, September 16, 1994).

surround future science fiction shows, like *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010) and *Battlestar Galactica* (SciFi Channel, 2004-2009).

Online, *X-Files* fans could collectively muse about the mysteries embedded within the show. What are the aliens doing on earth? What is the government hiding? Who is the shadowy, powerful figure known only as “Cigarette Smoking Man” who seems to be holding most of the strings? Also: when will Agents Mulder and Scully finally give in to their suppressed romance? With its many stand-alone episodes, *The X-Files* was not nearly as serialized as shows like *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and many others that would follow it in the next decade, but it was more serialized than most television dramas had ever been, especially shows of a similar genre.²¹

Serialization in *The X-Files* was different. The alien-government conspiracy was the creative heart of the show, and lurched forward with fragments of exposition revealed like a carnival Whack-a-Mole game that Mulder and Scully were not quite fast enough to master. For the audience, the joy of following the agents’ search for truth tapped into the infantile delight in a good game of peek-a-boo. The evidence built haltingly into a mythology that fans could ponder on their own hunt for the truth.²²

Still, most episodes in an *X-Files* season were stand-alone, and as delightful as many of those shows could be, they did not add to the mythology. The only episodes fans could be sure would engage with the mythology were the first and last of each season. *The X-Files* season

²¹ *Twin Peaks* should be mentioned here, both for its fully serialized storyline—much more serial than *The X-Files*—as well as for its influence on *The X-Files* in tone, style, and even talent. *The X-Files*, with its numerous “monster of the week” episodes, exemplified the step back from serialization that many network dramas took in the wake of *Twin Peaks*’ cancellation. Several members of the *Twin Peaks* cast would appear in *The X-Files*, including David Duchovny. *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (ABC, 1974-75) is the other short-lived show commonly cited as a direct ancestor of *The X-Files*. It starred Darren McGavin as a Chicago reporter who investigated supernatural stories. McGavin appeared twice in *The X-Files* as a retired F.B.I. agent who worked on some of the Bureau’s first “X-Files.”

²² The show backtracked on itself so many times, I find it impossible to cleanly summarize this mythology. It involves an alien-government conspiracy to create alien-human hybrids. And there is a mysterious collection of powerful men who are working with the aliens and controlling the U.S. government. And there are multiple kinds of aliens. And the bad aliens are going to wipe out humanity. And Lee Harvey Oswald definitely did NOT act alone.

premieres were consistently the highest rated episodes of the series, reaching over 20 million live viewers at the height of the series. Season finales, lacking the summer to build anticipation, earned slightly lower ratings. In the VCR era of the nineties, fans may have *re-watched* finales more than most episodes. What else would *X-Files* fans do all summer but reexamine the last episode for clues on what might transpire in the coming season?

The Betrayal of “Gethsemane”

The highest rated season finale was “Gethsemane,” the 24th episode of season four, which was also *The X-Files*’ highest rated season overall.²³ “Gethsemane” earned a 12.7 rating and a 19 share, with almost 20 million viewers.²⁴ More than 27 million viewers would watch the beginning of the following season. The only *X-Files* episode to do better was “Leonard Betts,” the twelfth episode of season four which benefited from following the 1997 Super Bowl. “Gethsemane” approached the ratings pinnacle for the series. But for Mulder and Scully, the episode’s story was the nadir of their search for the truth, a devastating setback on their journey of faith.

The first scene of the episode, however, offers hope for faith from the mouths of scientists.²⁵ The television in Mulder’s apartment is playing footage of a NASA Symposium at Boston University from November 20, 1972, as a graphic indicates. It is actual footage from a symposium with the evocative title, “Life Beyond Earth and the Mind of Man.” The first person

²³ “Gethsemane,” *The X-Files*, season four, episode 24, (Fox, May 18, 1997).

²⁴ Each rating point equals a percentage of all households with televisions in the United States. In 1997, that meant a ratings point equaled 970,000 homes. The share is the percentage of TV sets in use during the time period that were tuned to that particular show. Andy Meisler, “*The X-Files: I Want to Believe*,” (New York: Harper Prism, 1998).

²⁵ I am indebted to the website <http://www.insidethex.co.uk/scripts.htm>, which boasts fan-written transcripts of every episode of *The X-Files*, both films, its spin-off *The Lone Gunman*, and even the cross-over episode with *The Simpsons*. My inner-Scully led me to double-check quotations against the actual episode as the site’s transcripts are not perfect, but the site is nevertheless quite useful. *The X-Files* wiki at x-files.wikia.com, which carefully cites the specific episodes where certain facts and moments occur, is also valuable.

to speak on the screen (unidentified within the episode) is astronomer Richard Berendzen, the symposium's chair and editor of its published report. Berendzen, making his opening remarks, is quoting a report from the National Academy of Sciences which says, "Some feel that contact with other civilizations is no longer beyond our dream, but is a natural event in the history of mankind that will perhaps occur within the lifetime of many of us."²⁶ The episode returns to this footage in its penultimate scene when Mulder is shown watching anthropologist Ashley Montagu, astronomer Carl Sagan, and biologist George Wald all speculating that human contact with extraterrestrial life is imminent. This panel of famous scientists are Mulder's prophets, and perhaps this old video is his Old Testament that he turns on whenever he needs encouragement.

The episode is also framed by Scully's appearance in front of a different sort of panel. Just before the opening credits, she stands in a dimly lit room, speaking to a table of F.B.I. officials. She tells them she has discovered Mulder's work on the X-Files to be illegitimate, continuing, "It is my scientific opinion that he became over the course of these years a victim—a victim of his own false hopes and of his beliefs in the biggest of lies." Scully's refutation of Mulder's work—indeed, his entire life—was a startling proclamation, flying in the face of four years of partnership. But by this point in the episode the audience was already forewarned that something terrible has happened to Mulder. Throughout the fourth season, Mulder had been fending off niggling evidence that the government's alien cover-up was actually fabricated to hide some larger secret. Now the season finale begins with hints that he might be dead and, just as devastating, his faith and belief might have been false all this time.

After Scully's stunning claim, the opening credits roll, and perceptive fans of the show would have caught a slight alteration. Every episode of *The X-Files* begins with a few scenes as a

²⁶ Richard Berendzen, *Life Beyond Earth & the Mind of Man; A Symposium* (Washington: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Scientific and Technical Information Office, 1973).

teaser before running the opening credits. Mark Snow's famous, haunting, lyric-less theme plays over a montage of assorted, unconnected science-fiction images and video, with a few fragmented shots of the two agents at work. In the final moments, a close up of a blinking eye fades into the silhouette of a rocky landscape beneath a stormy sky. "Created by Chris Carter" appears in the bottom right corner then disappears in a flash of lightning as "THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE" appears in the sky. In the first season finale, the tagline was changed to "TRUST NO ONE," foreshadowing a character's dying warning. Subsequently, in many premieres and finales, as well as in several midseason shows, other taglines appeared. In "Gethsemane," the episode begins with "BELIEVE THE LIE."²⁷ This is blatantly bad advice, and, in echoing Scully's remark that this is exactly what Mulder did wrong, it is a troubling punctuation to an unsettling opening segment.

After the first commercial break, the episode tracks a few days backwards in time to a more hopeful moment. Two men, unknown characters, arrive by helicopter in a snowy, mountainous setting somewhere in the Yukon. Meeting their guide, the three men make their way up a mountain to a narrow crack. Inside is a little camp of several glowing tents, lighting up

²⁷ Re-watching this episode on Netflix prior to writing this section I noticed that no tagline appeared at the end of the credits. Initially, I thought this was by design, a clever allusion to the obliteration of Mulder's faith that the truth is out there. Upon subsequent investigation, I found that the opening credit taglines are missing from most, if not all of *The X-Files* episodes on Netflix. I watched the episode on Amazon Prime Instant Video and found the tagline was present. This teaches two lessons. First, Amazon Prime seems to be more historically reliable than Netflix. Perusing the Internet, I found that *The X-Files* is not the only show on Netflix with missing titles. I did not find an explanation from Netflix, but the most persuasive theory about how this happened is that it has something to do with international versions of *The X-Files*. Perhaps the title sequence of the show, which was enormously popular around the globe, was originally edited for international broadcast. And perhaps Netflix, for its own simplicity, streams the "blank" version of the credits. The larger issue for television historians is the problem of fully intact programs as they were originally aired. I long ago decided to sacrifice the effort to watch shows exactly as they were originally broadcast, including original commercials, in favor of being a "completionist" and watching every single episode of a series. Fortunately, most television shows are now including DVD and online rights when they license music to use in their shows. That was not always the case, as is demonstrated by the case of *Northern Exposure*. That show used a great deal of popular music, and licensing the original soundtrack raised the price of the first season DVD exorbitantly. Subsequent DVDs replaced licensed music with low-cost substitutes, making the sets more affordable for consumers but destroying the original content. This Netflix/*X-Files* tagline debacle is yet another reminder never to assume the historical integrity of digital copies of television shows, whether streamed online or watched on DVD. Television historians must always stay on their guard.

a large cavern. Without pausing, the men scramble up a short climb to reach their objective—a grey alien body frozen in the ice. “My God,” exclaims the older man, Dr. Arlinsky. He is later revealed to be a friend of Mulder’s and, in this scene, he is Mulder’s surrogate, a forensic anthropologist who works at the Smithsonian and is equally enthusiastic about discovering proof of the existence of aliens.²⁸

Arlinsky would seem to be the perfect composite of Scully and Mulder—a scientifically trained true believer in aliens. But his eagerness to believe the alien body is real indicates a lack of proper skepticism. Scully’s best quality is not her scientific talents but her skeptical nature. She is perfectly balanced by Mulder, who encourages her to remain open to all possibilities. Arlinsky lacks a Scully to restrain his most passionate beliefs.

Arlinsky flies back to Washington, meeting Mulder and Scully at the Smithsonian to show them a photo of the ice-encased body as well as ice core samples taken from around the body. Arlinsky claims the samples could not be faked, that they prove the body was frozen over 200 years ago, but he lets Scully take them for her own testing. She is doubtful. Mulder is more hopeful, but even he wonders if it could be a hoax; he has chased his share of wild geese. Arlinsky enlists Mulder to come back to the Yukon with him so Mulder can get the proof he has searched for his entire life.

In part, personal motives motivate Mulder’s quest for truth. In the first episode of the series, Mulder tells Scully his sister disappeared when they were children.²⁹ Mulder believes she was abducted by aliens. As we will see, *Touched by an Angel* proposes God as the solution to the problem of broken families. But Mulder’s search evolves into something far beyond his personal

²⁸ An anthropologist studies the flaws in human beings, believing them to be inherent to the species and thus the cause of humanity’s tendency for violence and other self-destructive behavior. Dr. Arlinsky would be a good *Coast to Coast AM* guest.

²⁹ “Pilot,” *The X-Files*, season one, episode zero (Fox, September 10, 1993).

woes. In the opening scenes of the mythology-heavy mid-season two episode, “Colony,” Mulder muses on his life in a monologue that plays over video of Scully and other doctors trying to resuscitate his lifeless body, nearly killed by the events the episode is about to present:

I have lived with a fragile faith built on the ether of vague memories from an experience that I can neither prove nor explain. When I was twelve, my sister was taken from me, taken from our home by a force that I came to believe was extraterrestrial. This belief sustained me, fueling a quest for truths that were as elusive as the memory itself. To believe as passionately as I did was not without sacrifice, but I always accepted the risks, to my career, my reputation, my relationships, to life itself. ... If I should die now, it would be with the certainty that my faith has been righteous. And if, through death, larger mysteries are revealed, I will have already learned the answer to the question that has driven me here, that there is intelligent life in the universe other than our own, that they are here among us, and that they have begun to colonize.³⁰

Mulder is not simply looking for his sister. Long before he discovers the truth about his family, Mulder believes his life has been well spent. He has progressed through a journey of risk and sacrifice, sustained by his pilgrim’s faith that would be fulfilled, in life or death, by the truth: “there is intelligent life in the universe other than our own.” To decode the allegorical meaning of the final lines of his monologue, “God is real, God is among us, and God is working in us.” Mulder survives that episode; raised from the dead, his righteousness is upheld.³¹ Though he is often single-minded in his pursuit of truth, Mulder’s motives are much less selfish than, for example, Arlinsky’s desire for fame. In *The X-Files*, the pursuit of knowledge and meaning is emphasized as heroic.

Alien Autopsy

In “Gethsemane,” Mulder leaves the skeptical Scully behind to accompany Arlinsky to the Yukon cave. They discover the excavation team has been slaughtered and the alien body is

³⁰ “Colony,” *The X-Files*, season two, episode 16 (Fox, February 10, 1995).

³¹ Resurrection is another common theme throughout *The X-Files*. Mulder and Scully are frequently brought back from the brink of death. Even the X-Files, the office Mulder and Scully officially occupy within the F.B.I., will be shut down and re-opened by the F.B.I. several times over the years.

apparently missing. Fortunately, they find Arlinsky's associate, Babcock, has survived his wounds. Anticipating the attack, he had buried the alien body. They dig it up and the three men bring it back to Washington where they perform an alien autopsy, and not for the first time on Fox.

With this autopsy scene, "Gethsemane" references another famous television event Fox had broadcast two years before, *Alien Autopsy: Fact or Fiction* (the special that *Coast to Coast AM* celebrated by inviting extraterrestrials living on earth to call in and talk to Art Bell on the air). Hosted by Jonathan Frakes, co-star of *Star Trek* films and television shows in the eighties and nineties, the hour-long, documentary-style show investigated, with apparent sincerity, whether found footage of the dissection of an extraterrestrial-like creature was evidence of alien contact. The black and white footage is interspersed with interviews of forensic doctors, movie special effects masters, and other experts commenting on the black and white footage. Their testimony is carefully edited to keep their opinions on the veracity of the footage as ambiguous as possible, though after the show aired, many of the experts made a point of articulating their certainty that the footage was a hoax.³²

When it aired on August 28, 1995, the show was the young network's best-rated Monday night special ever, capturing an 8.1 rating (almost eight million viewers) and a 14 share.³³ The next week Fox ran the special again, following an *X-Files* repeat and the show received nearly the same ratings. Two months later, it re-ran once more, again to similar ratings.³⁴ That same month, *Time* ran a feature, "Autopsy or Fraud-topsy," comparing the footage to the Zapruder film for the careful analysis it had inspired. The tape of the special was by then a best-seller in

³² Richard Corliss and William Tynan, "Autopsy or fraud-topsy," *Time*, November 27, 1995, 105.

³³ "Alien Autopsy repeats tonight," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 4, 1995, C9.

³⁴ Alex Kuczynski and Bill Carter, "Fox's Point Man for Perversity; 'World's Scariest Programmer,' Starring Mike Darnell as Himself," *New York Times*, February 26, 2000.

America's video stores. Was this the evidence Mulder's real world counterparts were searching for? According to *another* Fox special three years later, no. The footage was declared fiction on *World's Greatest Hoaxes: Secrets Revealed* (December 28, 1998), and over the years other investigators confirmed that finding.³⁵

Alien Autopsy was a unique television special at a unique moment in television broadcasting. Since the nineties, channels like SyFy (until 2009, it was called the SciFi Channel) and (disastrously for those hungering for quality historical programming) History network have become the go-to cable stations for such programming, and there are a variety of regularly scheduled shows pondering the existence of aliens, many of which are direct descendants of *Alien Autopsy*. The aesthetic format of *Alien Autopsy*—its investigative approach—owes much to *Unsolved Mysteries*, which was featuring UFO cases as early as its first full season in 1988.³⁶ *The X-Files* and *Alien Autopsy* are similar, too, in their emphasis on a scientific approach to supernatural questions.

The alien autopsy looks like something Mulder and Scully might have come across on *The X-Files*. In the black and white footage, two men wearing hazmat suits carefully examine and cut open the body. The alien looks similar to those shown on *The X-Files* and elsewhere in American science fiction. Its body is smaller than average humans with bigger, darker eyes set into a mushroom-like skull. The whole process looks like legitimate scientific inquiry, as professional as one of Scully's many autopsies. In *The X-Files* as well as in *Alien Autopsy* and *Coast to Coast AM*, aliens are serious business that deserves the attention of experts, not

³⁵ "News Flash! Alien Autopsy Was a Fake," *Salt Lake Tribune*, December 14, 1998, B5.

³⁶ *Unsolved Mysteries* aired on NBC from 1987-97 and CBS 97-99. During the 2000s some original seasons aired on Lifetime and Spike though most original episodes ran in syndication. As of early 2015, after 579 episodes, the series is no longer in production, though the studio that maintains production rights still maintains a website.

amateurs. At the same time, a certain amount of skepticism is welcome. It is a part of the investigative process, considering even the wildest theories possible until they are proven otherwise. Eyewitnesses to the infamous UFO crash that supposedly took place at Roswell, New Mexico in 1947 are treated with the same generous benefit of a doubt on *Alien Autopsy* as Mulder gives similar witnesses on *The X-Files*.

Tone is incredibly important to the aesthetic in *Alien Autopsy*, *The X-Files*, and *Touched by an Angel*. Each show considers the possibility of the existence of a supernatural creature seriously and without irony. This seriousness helps create each show's dramatic tension, keeping the stakes high. Consider how ineffective either a laboratory experiment or a church service would be if either adopted a sarcastic detachment to their own explorations of truth. *The X-Files* and *Touched by an Angel* rely on a similar tone as they tell their stories.³⁷ Ultimately in both shows, postmodern relativism gives way to scientific fact and experienced truth.

The X-Files took every opportunity it could to engage with even the wildest, most obscure fables and speculations from cultures across the globe. Mulder often cites superstition and lore as clues to help understand that week's supernatural case. Of course every investigation gets a fully scientific approach from the two agents, lending the show a crucial veneer of realism. *The X-Files* never claimed to be non-fiction, but its engagement with reality coupled with the reliability of the two main characters as trustworthy investigators offered another layer of thrill to the series; the creepy monsters, the thrilling close-encounters with space ships, the wondrous brushes with aliens—they were all simultaneously fantastical and, supported by the agents'

³⁷ Occasionally, *The X-Files* did produce a self-referential episode that joked about the wild subject matter of the series. The heavy tension typical for the show is notably absent in such stories, making them an entirely different viewing experience. That difference in tone is what makes these episodes "work." See for example "Humbug," *The X-Files*, season two, episode 20 (Fox, March 31, 1995); "Jose Chung's 'From Outer Space,'" *The X-Files*, season three, episode 20 (Fox, April 12, 1996); "Bad Blood," *The X-Files*, season five, episode 12 (Fox, February 22, 1998); and "Dreamland" *The X-Files*, season six, episodes 4-5 (Fox, November 29 and December 6, 1998).

scientific method, *possible*. In the tradition of 20th century American science-fiction, *The X-Files* leaned heavily on science. Thus, the show not only depicted a blend of science and faith, it relied on that blend to bolster its storytelling.

Science and Lies

The autopsy looks real, but Mulder, though he fervently believes an alien crash was covered up at Roswell, would never have been fooled by *Alien Autopsy*. He is as much a man of science as Scully. In “Gethsemane,” however, the science is a lie. Mulder leaves the autopsy site, fortuitously called away by Scully who has discovered evidence of the lies. Her skepticism apparently saves his life because Babcock, it turns out, is a part of the government conspiracy that planted the alien body. He welcomes a co-conspirator into the warehouse. The man shoots Arlinsky before confirming with Babcock that Mulder left the site convinced he was looking at a real alien. “Then we’re the only ones who know,” points out the unnamed killer ominously.

But thanks to Scully, Mulder *does* know the alien body is a fake. While Mulder is climbing mountains in the Yukon, Scully tracks down Michael Kritschgau, an employee at the Department of Defense who is somehow involved in the conspiracy. Kritschgau tells Scully and Mulder that the DoD has fabricated evidence suggesting the existence of aliens in order to cover up the “unbridled and unchecked” operations of the military industrial complex. Mulder has been duped by an elaborate hoax; the body in this episode, as well as apparently all of the evidence he has observed over the four seasons of *The X-Files* has all been fabricated. According to Kritschgau, Mulder is a pawn for the government, which is hoping the alien body will finally convince him to go public with his belief in aliens, adding another layer to obfuscate their true activities.

“The lies are so deep,” Kritschgau tells Mulder, “the only way to cover them is to create something even more incredible. They invented you. Your regression hypnosis, the story of your sister's abduction, the lies they fed your father. You wanted to believe so badly. And who could have blamed you?” And the body, he concludes, “is already long gone.”

Sure enough, Mulder and Scully race back to the warehouse where the only bodies they find are human; Arlinsky and Babcock are both dead. Mulder, desperate, begins to argue with Scully, clinging to any chance Kritschgau might be lying. But Scully tells him, “I'm sorry, but the facts here completely overwhelm any argument against them.” Realizing she is right, he leaves, and the next time Scully sees him in this episode, Mulder has apparently shot himself in his apartment.

But that is not the next time the audience sees him. Back in his apartment, before his apparent suicide, Mulder is shown watching the 1972 NASA Symposium. His prophets continue their hopeful predictions, but they are no comfort. They were dupes, too. Mulder is weeping. Everything he has worked for his entire life is betrayed in “Gethsemane.”

While Mulder's world is crashing down, Scully is going through a crisis of her own. She has cancer. After numerous hints, the diagnosis was confirmed in the middle of the season. Now, early in the season finale, Scully tells the F.B.I. panel that her cancer has metastasized and only a miracle will save her.

Her mother, seeking to provoke such a miracle, invites their priest to a family dinner. Scully's Catholic upbringing is regularly referenced on the show, as demonstrated by the cross necklace given to her by her mother.³⁸ In cases involving suspected religious miracles, Scully is often quicker to believe in a supernatural explanation to the mystery than Mulder. For example,

³⁸ The cross's origin is first discussed by Mulder and Scully's mother in “Ascension,” season two, episode six (Fox, October 21, 1994), though Scully is shown wearing the cross in earlier episodes.

in the season three episode “Revelations,” Scully’s willingness to believe supernatural signs that Mulder dismisses miraculously helps her save the life of a boy with stigmata.³⁹ At the conclusion of that episode Scully goes to confession for the first time in six years. She discusses miracles with the priest, who encourages her that perhaps God was using this case to call her back to her faith.

By the events of “Gethsemane,” Scully has not yet re-embraced Christianity. The family’s priest sits next to her at dinner, indicating that her mother told him about her cancer. “I know it’s been some time since we’ve spoken ourselves, since you drifted from the church... But a time of personal crisis, a threat to your health, going back to your faith is important and essential. ... Faith can make you stronger.” It is a clichéd pitch for faith, one based solely on the therapeutic benefits of religion. Have faith and you will feel better. Scully is unmoved: “I haven’t felt the need. I have strength and I’m not going to come running back now. It’s just not who I am. I’d be lying to myself, and to you.” Her response references Mulder’s crisis, the realization that his own faith had been entrusted in lies. The potential therapeutic byproducts of faith are not enough for Scully to decide to believe again.

The potential for healing—therapeutic, familial, or bodily—is not enough to motivate faith in either Scully or Mulder. Belief must be ultimately based in science and aimed at the discovery of truth and meaning. Both Mulder and Scully abandon faith when it contradicts reason. At the end of season four, Scully is dying and Mulder is dead, and after a four-year faith journey, the pair has nothing to show for their search. No hope of escaping death. No higher power.

³⁹ “Revelations” *The X-Files*, season three, episode 11 (Fox, December 15, 1995).

Mulder and Scully were frozen in this moment for five and a half months before the season five premiere. It was a dismal cliffhanger. *The X-Files* is always about both science and faith operating in tandem, and in “Gethsemane,” the show suggests the meaninglessness of one in the absence of the other. This is *The X-Files*’ diagnosis of the culture wars. Science and faith are not opposites. Faith does not inherently hold science back. Science is not the mortal enemy of faith; they have always advanced in tandem. Faith must converse with the scientific facts of human existence or else, as Mulder realizes, it becomes useless, the quaint ramblings of prophets who did not know any better.

Faith Reborn

Happily, Mulder is not dead! Eventually, and somewhat miraculously, Scully’s cancer goes away. More importantly, in the fifth season premiere, “Redux,” the agents begin to rebuild their faiths.⁴⁰ Mulder resumes his search for proof of aliens, and Scully invites her priest to her hospital bedside to help her pray. Their faith, however, is not merely an on-switch that they flip when they realize it is needed. There is another ingredient to their science and faith dynamic. A chord of three is not easily broken, and for Mulder and Scully, that chord is love. Throughout most of the series the love between Mulder and Scully is almost never explicitly erotic. Instead, their intimacy and trust increase as they work together as both friends and colleagues. Having been originally paired up by their superiors, Mulder and Scully are perhaps the most successful arranged marriage ever depicted by American culture. Love inspires Mulder and Scully to continue on their journeys of faith even when faith is apparently lost. Love is the reason their

⁴⁰ The fifth season began with a two-part premiere stretched over two weeks, “Redux,” *The X-Files*, season five, episode one (Fox, November 2, 1997); and “Redux II,” *The X-Files*, season five, episode two, (Fox, November 9, 1997). “Redux” was the highest rated episode of the series other than the mid-season four episode that immediately followed the Super Bowl.

partnership works. It makes them better scientists, as they lovingly consider each other's theories. And it makes their faith stronger as they encourage each other to pursue their beliefs.

At the conclusion of the second episode of season five, the Cigarette Smoking Man offers Mulder a deal. He will cure Scully. He will return Mulder's sister. He will even tell Mulder the truth. All Mulder has to do is quit the F.B.I. and come work for him. The Cigarette Smoking Man, for neither the first nor the last time, plays the role of the devil, and Mulder is sorely tempted. Late at night, he goes to Scully's hospital bed. He weeps silently as she sleeps. The next morning he returns and tells her he was lost last night, and almost took the deal, but changed his mind by the light of the morning. "Then why'd you come here if you'd already made up your mind?" asks Scully. Mulder smiles and replies, "Because I knew you'd talk me out of it if I was making a mistake." The Cigarette Smoking Man's offers a Faustian bargain. Mulder would receive power and knowledge as well as save Scully's life. But Mulder will not take the shortcut this dangerous man offers. He falls back on his faith that he can find the truth on his own, and that somehow Scully will get better. Scully reassures him in his path.

As he leaves, Scully tells him she will be praying for him. Mulder leaves with renewed strength as the priest arrives to continue Scully's own renewal of faith. Through love, the pair models a healthy ecumenical relationship. Though Mulder does not share Scully's religious faith and Scully does not share Mulder's belief in aliens, their willingness to bare their hopes, theories, and beliefs to each other has a positive effect on their individual faiths as well as their scientific, investigative processes. Indeed, their relationship is so intimate their faiths are not individual experiences anyway. Mulder and Scully demonstrate that faith does not have to be an inherently lonely journey in this scientific age.

Touched by an Angel: the Inspiration of Death

In *The X-Files* the coupling of science and faith begets hope that death might be forestalled. *Touched by an Angel* presents a starkly different formula. On this show, death forces individuals to confront their faithlessness, and only the trauma of death can spark a personal transformation. *Touched by an Angel* was conceived, marketed, and received as inspirational television, and the show is draped in a veneer of bright comfort, but its true ideology is revealed by its preoccupation with death. Still, transcending its underlying morbidity, *Touched by an Angel* is inspirational, not for of its depiction of humans, but for its presentation of non-humans. *The X-Files* and *Touched by an Angel* overlap in the skies. Both shows rise above contemporary doubt, depicting real and active supernatural beings. In both shows, the protagonists un-ironically interact with unearthly power. Mulder and Scully find out what the angels already know: God is among us... representatives of a supernatural, higher power are among us. They have been among us as long as humans have existed. And they are in control.

One problem for the shows' protagonists, a huge one, is the crisis of faith in America. As ostensibly diverse in subject matter as *Touched by an Angel* was from week to week, the angels are always trying to strengthen faith. In *The X-Files*, Mulder's work is not taken seriously by regular people he encounters, and Scully's scientifically-based doubt corresponds to the decline in faith in Western culture over the last few centuries. Both shows demonstrate that the decline in faith is a bad thing. In both shows, average people live their lives under the assumption that there is nothing supernatural out there, or at least, nothing that they need to be concerned about. In both shows, the main characters constantly observe disbelief leading people into trouble. Disbelief is naïve. Belief is wise. Faith is much-needed. The more belief spreads, the better the world will be.

Touched by an Angel ran on CBS from 1994 to 2003.⁴¹ Before its premiere the premise was derided by critics. A few outspoken and well-placed supporters of the show, thousands of letters to CBS, and some rising ratings at the end of season one prompted CBS to order a second season, and by its third season the show was a hit, finishing in the top ten at the end of the year and remaining there through 2000.⁴²

In the show, God has an army of angels working undercover as humans. Roma Downey plays Monica, a chipper, coffee-loving angel who, in the first episode of the series, is promoted by God from search and rescue to case worker. God, though never seen or even heard, does regularly answer the angel's earnest prayers, supplying them with critical understanding or advice, or producing a clear miracle. Each week, Monica gets involved with a person's life just as a crisis is about to strike. She usually is not able to stop the crisis even when she wants to; that is not her primary purpose. Rather she guides the person through the trouble, improving them spiritually so they can be a better person. Monica's maternal, no-nonsense boss, Tess, played by Della Reese, leads Monica to her human assignment at the beginning of the episode and helps her out along the way, also remaining undercover. From the middle of the second season, they are accompanied by Andrew, the Angel of Death, played by John Dye.⁴³

The people who Monica, Tess, and Andrew help do not know they are angels until the climax of the episode, when a backlight turns on and Monica reveals her real identity. This revelation is often the final push that encourages the person to change themselves and their

⁴¹ *The X-Files* ran the same number of seasons as *Touched by an Angel*, nine total, but started one year earlier.

⁴² Martha Williamson and Robin Sheets, *Touched by an Angel: Stories from the Hit Television Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 35. Note that Zondervan, now part of HaperCollins, is a leading publisher of Christian books and bibles.

⁴³ That is correct. The Angel of Death is played by an actor named Dye.

behavior. Monica starts glowing. She tells them she is an angel. She tells them God loves them. And she encourages them to take comfort in that and inspires them to change their ways.

Unlike Mulder and Scully, the “assignments” on *Touched by an Angel* are not desperately searching for the truth that is out there. Indeed, that is the problem. At the turn of the 21st century, the flame has gone out in humanity’s relationship to God. Faith in God can no longer be assumed throughout western culture. In *Touched by an Angel*, the consequence of that consistently plays out in one particular arena of life. In almost every episode, families are experiencing broken relationships. When a culture lacks faith, it also tends to lack family values, or so the traditionalist side of the culture wars argued in the nineties. *Touched by an Angel*, though, is not politically conservative, explicitly or implicitly. Nevertheless, *Touched by an Angel* aligns with the culture wars argument that traditionalists were making in the mid-90s: the greatest cause of strife in nineties American culture is the decline in family values.⁴⁴

Monica is always successful in her mission, but it is not just the comforting presence of actual angels that transforms people. It takes a dramatic experience to get her assignments into a state where they are ready to change. You might expect her to dazzle them with a miracle, but other than the revelation of the existence of angels which happens every episode, magic and miracles are rare. The angels arrive on the cusp of some crisis, and this crisis almost always involves death. It is not angels or miracles, but death that is the crucial impetus for radical change on *Touched by an Angel*.

⁴⁴*Touched by an Angel* did one episode on abortion. Season seven’s sixth episode, “The Empty Chair” (CBS, November 19, 2000), dealt with a middle-aged couple grappling, years later, with the haunting memory of their decision to have an abortion. They regret it, but the episode does not depict the angels convincing the couple that they made a mistake. Instead, the angels are primarily trying to salvage the couple’s marriage. Another family is in need of repair.

The Angel of Death

When I started telling people I was looking at *Touched by an Angel* I was surprised by how many friends piped up to reminisce about watching the show when it was on. One of my friends said that his grandmother loved the show, although watching was an intense experience. He told me his grandmother would always get anxious whenever the Angel of Death showed up. She knew that meant someone was probably going to die. As I watched the series, I thought of that poor, fretting grandmother whenever the Angel of Death appeared. The Angel of Death's real name is Andrew, and he is a pleasant fellow. He does not dress in black or carry a scythe. He is never scary. "I've come to accompany you to your final reward," he will tell his assignment in a subdued yet joyful tone. Andrew is actually something of a heartthrob, as evidenced by just about any *Touched by an Angel* fan site you can find on the internet, as well as occasional references to his handsome features by mortal female characters on the show.

John Dye was not the first or only Angel of Death. In the *Touched by an Angel* universe, it seems there are many Angels of Death, just as there are many supervisor angels and case worker angels.⁴⁵ Andrew, like his predecessors, was at first only a recurring character, but by season three he was appearing in every episode. Though he never lost his job as the Angel of Death, he frequently assisted Monica and Tess with their assignment, and sometimes no one died in the episode. But usually, someone did.

If Andrew was not with Monica and Tess in the opening scene as they discussed their assignment, he was bound to appear sooner or later. It is these more abrupt appearances that must

⁴⁵ In the first season, Charles Rocket played an Angel of Death named Adam. Rocket is perhaps most famous for using the F-word on *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, February 21, 1981). Rocket's Angel of Death was just as earnest as Andrew yet carried the actor's interesting edge of smugness. Dye's Andrew replaced an angel named Henry in season two, played in only two episodes by Bruce Altman. In a macabre bit of trivia, Altman is the only Angel of Death still alive. Rocket committed suicide in 2005 and Dye died of heart failure in 2011 when he was 47-years-old.

have tormented grandmothers across America. In a season four episode, “How Do You Spell Faith?” for example, Monica is standing with her assignment, a young boy with an overwhelmed single mother and a loving older brother who takes excellent care of him.⁴⁶ Monica and the boy watch as his older brother waves goodbye and gets into a car. As the car pulls away, Monica is startled to see Andrew riding in the back seat. He gives her a knowing glance then with a heavy sigh turns away as sad music swells in the background and the car drives off.⁴⁷ Returning from commercial, the news reaches Monica and the boy; his brother has died in a car accident.

Sometimes Andrew’s presence foreshadows death, but it is not uncommon for the audience, the characters, and even Monica to be surprised by death. Other episodes begin with a death, and Monica arrives on the scene to help the characters through their grief. Many episodes are about characters facing the realization that they are going to die, and the angels help them and their families grapple with that reality until, at the climax of the episode, they leave their body behind with their mourning-yet-comforted family and contentedly follow Andrew off into their afterlife. Though the angels occasionally tussle with demons for a soul, and the devil himself appears in a few episodes over the course of the series, no one goes to hell. While the dead are led away to peace, Monica continues the more pressing work on the living.

It seems as if the angels can barely accomplish anything in the lives of humans without death somehow being a part of the process. The same is true, of course, in both the Jewish and Christian traditions that inform the show. Death helped the Israelites escape Egypt. And Christ’s

⁴⁶ “How Do You Spell Faith?” *Touched by an Angel*, season four, episode 20 (CBS, March 29, 1998).

⁴⁷ A lot of these appearances are unintentionally hilarious. Once you have seen enough of Foreshadowing Andrew it is hard not to chuckle when he appears unexpectedly on the scene, his face downcast and his eyes communicating the bad news to Monica and the audience. Death is coming. Of course, I do not think most of *Touched by an Angel*’s audience would have seen this routine as comical; it is the sort of thing that appears during a more compressed viewing of the series. That said, the show’s earnest tone and frequently serious subject-matter usually makes it difficult to watch ironically.

death on the cross atoned for humanity's sin. Out of death comes new life. So it is on *Touched by an Angel*: only death can provoke the living to change.

Angels Flying High

By its fifth season, *Touched by an Angel* was averaging a 13.1 Nielsen rating, making it the second highest rated primetime drama (after *ER*) in the 1998-99 season (eighth overall).⁴⁸ In the middle of the season, *People* magazine featured the show's three stars on its cover.⁴⁹ A year before, Roma Downey had hosted *Saturday Night Live*, getting some angelic encouragement during her monologue from Tracy Morgan playing Della Reese playing Tess.⁵⁰ Critics might have continued to roll their eyes at the angel show for being too "goody-goody and lovey-dovey," but the dove (the show's symbol) was soaring for CBS.⁵¹

The success of the spiritually-themed program was not, however, transforming the primetime schedule. CBS was using *Touched by an Angel*'s spin-off, *Promised Land*, as counter-programming to NBC's Thursday night comedy lineup, but the latter, built on two solid rocks, *Friends* and *Frasier*, was still a ratings behemoth in year one, A.S. (After Seinfeld). *Touched by an Angel* remained a television anomaly, the exception that proved the rule which the medium's most outspoken critics—many of them culture warriors—had been crying for years: "family-friendly" entertainment was hard to find on primetime network television. *Touched by an Angel*'s fifth season clip show engaged directly with this critique, celebrating itself as the kind of program Americans wanted with the kind of values Americans *needed*.

⁴⁸ From '96-'97 through '99-'00 *Touched by an Angel* finished 10th, 6th, 8th, and 10th in the overall season-long primetime rankings.

⁴⁹ Michael A. Lipton, "Heaven Help Us!" *People Magazine*, February 22, 1999.

⁵⁰ *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, February 14, 1998). Oh, to be a fly on the wall for Downey's interactions with that week's musical guest, Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliot.

⁵¹ Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* as quoted in Michael A. Lipton, "Heaven Help Us!" *People Magazine*, February 22, 1999.

Is it a coincidence that *Touched by an Angel*'s popularity peaked as the President became embroiled in the Monica Lewinski scandal? To an extent, *Touched by an Angel* did become a pawn in the culture wars. The show's supporters who helped save the show after its ratings-starved first season preached that this show was "an alternative for viewers sick of violent, sex-driven drama...unashamed to take a strong moral, even spiritual, point of view."⁵²

Groups with names like The Traditional Values Coalition, the National Religious Broadcasters, and the Family Research Council all proclaimed their support for the show. The President of the latter, Gary Bauer, a one-time Reagan aide who briefly sought the 2000 Republican Presidential nomination, believed the show appealed to what many Americans were searching for on their television. "On the one hand, the culture becomes more secularized all the time," explained Bauer, "but there's a lot of evidence that people are looking for spiritually uplifting sorts of things."⁵³ Bauer was being politically diplomatic, but those two key S-words—"secularized" and "spiritually"—reveal his culture war mindset. *Touched by an Angel* was a rare incursion into the network's primetime hours for the forces of the religious-traditionalist side. The secular humanist Americans might be headed to hell in Slick Willie Clinton's hand basket, but God-fearing Americans could find at least one hour of television each week that they could safely watch with their families.

The Christianity the show supposedly depicts, however, is vague and almost never explicit. A network show aiming at a broad audience, it is uninterested in offending, and thus the angels do not discriminate by the religious identity of the people they help. Monica gets a Jewish assignment on occasion. The name "Jesus" is virtually never used, although the show did an

⁵² Barbara Reynolds, "Be an Angel, CBS; Give TVs Special Angels a Break," *USA Today*, February 24, 1995.

⁵³ Phil McCombs, "A Chorus of Hallelujahs; 'Touched by an Angel' Has Taken Wing as Families Find It's Heaven-Sent," *Washington Post*, May 18, 1996, C1.

annual Christmas special, and a man implied to be Jesus shows up to give Monica a promotion in the series finale.⁵⁴ Religious texts and traditions are nowhere to be seen on the show, and it thus veers towards a New Age-influenced spirituality that emphasizes a spiritual experience for the self rather than a considered engagement with specific creeds.⁵⁵ And yet, the show was deemed and celebrated as Christian by people supposedly trumpeting religious orthodoxy as the nation's great need. Supporters from the traditionalist side of the culture war embraced the show because it offered a general model of values, emphasizing the importance of family even while it utterly failed to lay out Christian doctrine.

The angels on the show did not seem to seek a global or even a national religious awakening. Monica's job title of case worker meant just what it said; she worked case-by-case, changing person by person. Occasionally the angels might help out a whole family, a small group of people, or even a small town, but they never tried to fix societal problems all at once. The key unit of focus was the individual, not the community. In fact, that is also how the show's fandom was observed. Individuals began writing letters to the show explaining the personal, therapeutic effect a certain episode had on them. Those letters reached the producers, writers, cast, and crew who repeated and shared such correspondence with journalists. As a result, most media coverage of *Touched by an Angel* included examples of viewers sharing their personal response to the show.

⁵⁴ Della Reese is an ordained minister in the Unity Church. According to their national website, the Unity Church's founders "regarded Jesus as the great example rather than the great exception; interpreted the Bible metaphysically; and taught that God is present within all of us." Reese did not write for the show, but, at the outset, she was the show's most well-known cast member as well as its most visible and outspoken representative.

⁵⁵ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "New Age Religion," in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, eds. Linda Woodhead, Hiroko Kawanami, and Christopher H. Partridge (London: Routledge, 2002), 259. See also Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

Those fans included prison inmates. Downey, speaking to reporters at a press event in the middle of the show's breakout third season ('96-'97), reported, "We got a letter not long ago from a guy who said, 'Every Sunday night the whole cell block goes dead quiet watching *Touched by an Angel*.' You can say, 'Yeah, a bunch of guys in prison are sitting around watching *Touched by an Angel*.' But it's very deeply touching because what this man said was, 'It's the only time all week that I ever hear the words, I love you.'"⁵⁶ Thus inspired, the show's writers brought the angels behind bars to minister to inmates several times throughout the series.⁵⁷

People's 1999 cover story included excerpts from four fan letters. A suicidal alcoholic wrote to say she was moved to enter counseling at her church. A daughter of a drug addict asked if she could get a copy of an episode that depicted her mother's plight. A man whose fiancée died from an eating disorder and whose friend died in a plane crash sent a letter to say the show had inspired him to express his grief through writing. And a 14-year-old girl wrote to report that an episode about a wounded, painkiller-addicted policeman had taught her "God loves you, and that not all the drugs in the world can replace His love... When you don't know what to do, you pray to God and ask him for an answer. And when the time is right you will receive that answer. God has perfect timing."⁵⁸

These letters reveal much about the fan culture unique to the show. And the media coverage of these letters reveals that the show's stars, its show runner, Martha Williamson, and

⁵⁶ Tom Jicha, "Actress's Captive Audience: 'Touched by an Angel' Popular among Prison Inmates," *Sun Sentinel*, January 11, 1997.

⁵⁷ Examples include: "Sins of the Father," *Touched by an Angel*, season three, episode four, September 29, 1996; "Voice of an Angel," *Touched by an Angel*, season six, episode seven, November 14, 1999; "True Confessions," *Touched by an Angel*, season six, episode 19, March 19, 2000; "An Angel on My Tree," *Touched by an Angel*, season seven, episode 10, December 17, 2000; "Band of Angels," *Touched by an Angel*, season seven, episode twenty, April 15, 2001; "Famous Last Words," *Touched by an Angel*, season eight, episode six, October 27, 2001.

⁵⁸ Lipton.

presumably its entire crew, were well aware of the reaction they were generating. Downey said she and Reese would cry while read the letters from prison inmates.⁵⁹ Dye admitted having the same reaction upon reading a letter from a rape victim reacting to an episode in which his character witnessed but could not prevent a rape.⁶⁰ And Williamson claimed that guest stars were transformed for the better simply from performing on the show: “I can tell you of many instances when an actor would come to the show during a difficult time in his or her life—immediately after the loss of a loved one, in the middle of a divorce, or during a time when they were dealing with an addiction—and they would find themselves completely embraced by a remarkable group of people, a crew that just loved them. I have letters and letters from actors who said this is the best experience they ever had. One actor who came as an atheist left a believer.”⁶¹

Real people claimed they were transformed from watching the fictional angels transform fictional people. Not surprisingly, those involved on the show began to feel a great deal of pride in their work. Williamson told *60 Minutes* (*Touched by an Angel*'s Sunday night lead-in), “I want to get people to reach out to God. And more than that, I want to get people feeling good when they turn that show off. I want to inspire people to look at themselves. That is what counts. See, the best use of television in my opinion is to inspire people to self-examination.”⁶²

The most popular show about faith in the nineties hoped to create a therapeutic reaction in its audience, one that its viewers seemed to greatly desire. The show thus emphasizes the triumph of the therapeutic, encouraging belief in God not through a thorough and convincing

⁵⁹ Jicha.

⁶⁰ Lipton.

⁶¹ Phil Boatwright, “‘Touched by an Angel’ Led Actors to Christ, Creator Says,” *Baptist Press*, August 27, 2004, accessed January 29, 2015, <http://www.bpnews.net/18958>.

⁶² Ed Bradley interview with Martha Williamson, *60 Minutes*, April 27, 1997. Viewed on the *Touched by an Angel* Season Four DVD, 2007.

religious system that explains humanity's relationship to the universe, but because God, the arch-therapist, wants to make people feel good.⁶³

The Self-Congratulating Clip Show

In the middle of its fifth season and at the height of its popularity, *Touched by an Angel* scheduled its second clip show, "The Medium and the Message." The episode aired on CBS January 10, 1999, winning its time slot with a 12.5 rating and an 18 share.⁶⁴ A clip show, compiled by the people who make the show, reveals the way they think about the series they are putting on the air. This clip show reiterates Williamson's belief that these are the angels American television needs.

"The Medium and the Message" opens with an establishing shot of a city, a rare locale for the angels to venture. Usually their cases bring them to small towns and suburban homes. When they do go to the city, they tend to encounter people who must be healed of their preoccupation with money and career. This time the angels arrive at the headquarters of National Network Television (NNT). Tess tells Monica she is following a long line of angels who periodically appear with a simple reminder for the network's president, T.K. McKenna: God wants him to follow his dreams. Monica eventually gets sidetracked from these instructions and tries to pitch McKenna on a show about angels, with clips from her past adventures emphasizing her argument to the audience.

Before she goes inside, she and Andrew pause to look at the televisions outside NNT offering a sampling of the network's programming, which include a cop show on Tuesday, a show about buildings being demolished on Wednesday, "Explosions Etc." on Thursday, and a

⁶³ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic; Uses of Faith after Freud*, (1966; repr., ed. Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006).

⁶⁴ "Nielsen Ratings," *Variety*, January 18, 1999, 70.

show on Friday (which I hope will make it to the real world someday)—“America’s Funniest Surgeries.”⁶⁵ Monica and Andrew are disgusted at NNT’s offerings. Andrew recalls the pre-television world: “Families used to sit in front of the fire and they would tell stories and they would keep warm by the hearth and now they sit around the television and they stare at the tube instead of the flames. And nobody’s any warmer when it’s over.” NNT’s television programs are bad for families, so that is what Monica sets out to fix.

Inside the offices it is more of the same; Monica overhears a pitch for a show about alien cowboys. McKenna’s sassy, brassy assistant, Irene, runs interference on a man holding a bag filled with complaints about “Explosions Etc.” He does not have an appointment. Neither does Monica. Typical for the show, whatever supernatural ability Monica uses to slip passed Irene is not captured on camera. She appears just as McKenna is bragging on the phone about coming up with the idea for a bus blowing up last night on the highly rated episode of “Explosions Etc.” McKenna is not surprised at Monica’s sudden appearance; he is used to people appearing unexpectedly in his office with an inspirational message, although he does not yet realize he has been receiving a long line of angels from God. Monica starts to tell him about her idea for a show about angels and the clips begin to play.

Clip shows offer viewers a nostalgic reminiscence of past episodes, particularly in an era before DVD sets allowed fans to re-watch their favorite episodes whenever they desired. In this episode, scenes from the first four and a half seasons of the show flow through the screen. Indeed, Raymond William’s descriptive word, “flow,” is particularly useful in describing the nature of television clip shows.⁶⁶ The narrative structure within which the clips were originally

⁶⁵ Is it a continuous loop of the classic *Seinfeld* episode when Jerry and Kramer dropped a Junior Mint into a body cavity? Or could it be just a *M.A.S.H.* reboot?

⁶⁶ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975).

set is completely demolished. The clip show presents a collage of memories, but the viewer has no control over how much time they can spend enjoying each memory as they would if they were examining a photo collage or even flipping through a book they had read before. The clips flow unceasingly. The viewer has a moment to exclaim, “Oh! I love that episode!” before the next clip is upon him or her.

NNT’s President takes Monica to a room full of television writers to pitch them her idea for a show. While she explains it to them, several sets of clips contradict the impression of NNT’s creative minds of what a show about angels might look like. “The Angel of Death sounds scary!” “No, actually Andrew is kind and gentle.” The episode cuts to a series of clips about Andrew. “Angels don’t have attitude!” “Let me tell you about Tess!” The episode cuts to a series of clips about Tess. “Do the angels walk around with glowing wings?” “No, actually they are disguised as regular people with a variety of occupations.” The episode cuts to a series of clips showing the angels in their various disguises. And so on.

Ironically, given the angels’ distaste for NNT’s programming, Monica emphasizes that angel-work can be action-packed. The subsequent collection of clips includes numerous shootings, scenes with children in danger, and even an exploding building that looks like it would work on *Explosions Etc.* Even *Touched by an Angel* relies on violence for entertainment. Presumably, though, it earns the right to use violence because it has such an overall positive effect on its viewers. Unfortunately, *Explosions Etc.* cannot share in that boast.

The NNT writers Monica meets with, representative of most television creators, never appreciate the appeal of the show she is describing. They would prefer to do a show about heaven being a bowling alley with God being the guy who rents the shoes. They want the Angel

of Death to be a zombie with a sinister name who cackles with pleasure whenever he kills someone.

After hearing that suggestion, Monica quietly exits the writers room, leaving them to create the terrible, unwholesome show the episode suggests typical television writers would come up with—the anti-*Touched by an Angel*. Monica’s disgusted departure resembles the real story Martha Williamson tells about how she got involved with *Touched by Angel*. She was offered the job of show runner for the series, but she hated the original pilot, in which Tess and Monica did not get along and God was depicted as a distant, iron-fisted manager of his staff of angels. She declined the position. A few days later, moved by prayerful reconsideration, she went back to CBS and explained to the executives everything she would do differently. She left with the job.⁶⁷ From the very start, *Touched by an Angel*’s creators imagined it as something other than typical television, something that would serve a different—higher—purpose.⁶⁸

Inside NNT’s headquarters, Monica finally finds one employee who agrees that many people want to watch something other than the usual. Irene, McKenna’s assistant, tells her that she did not like her boss’s idea for the bus explosion. Irene believes “We do need shows about real people but unfortunately Mr. McKenna doesn’t understand that.” He was once a talented writer himself but he has long since lost touch with how real people live. If McKenna’s car breaks down, Irene explains, he just calls a limo. Irene’s car did not start that morning and now she will have to take the bus home...

⁶⁷ Williamson and Sheets, 23-28.

⁶⁸ This sort of thinking is a fairly common mindset for some of the greatest and most popular television shows in the nineties as well as throughout the medium’s history. At the beginning of the decade, *Seinfeld* evolved largely out of Larry David’s and Jerry Seinfeld’s lack of television experience as well as their stubborn faith in their own sense of what was funny, even when it flew in the face of network instructions. And at the turn of the millennium, HBO marketed its program with the tagline, “It’s not TV. It’s HBO.”

Later that night Monica, working late on her ideas for the angel show, finds McKenna distraught in his office. Someone hijacked a city bus and copied the bus explosion scene from *Explosions Etc.* Eventually, he learns Irene died in the explosion. Her last wish, relayed via Andrew who was with her when she died, was that McKenna receives his old script that she had saved long after he told her to throw it away. The revelation that Monica is an angel gives McKenna the courage to take the script to the network's board, a group of suited, grey-haired, white men who balk at his suggestion that they cancel *Explosions Etc.* because, after all, it is their top-rated show. McKenna insists, however, saying that he will be replacing it with his show, *The Home of the Brave*. "Starting now," he announces, "this network is going to be the place where families can plop themselves down on their sofas after dinner and watch all night long without ever thinking about changing the channel... If we do the right thing first, the ratings will follow." McKenna's show is not about angels or, apparently, God. However, it is apparently family-centric instead of violence-centric.

Overall, the episode argues that television shapes behavior. If people see violence on television, they will commit violence. Show them God's love, as *Touched by an Angel* does weekly, and they will be inspired to live better. Show them a happy family life, as *The Home of the Brave* will on NNT, and they will have happier, healthier families. Setting aside the debate over whether and to what extent television actually influences behavior, clearly *Touched by an Angel's* creators believed that most other primetime television was problematic, and that their show was a solution. Moreover, the correspondence they received from their viewers encouraged them in this belief.

As Monica's pitch, supported by actual clips from *Touched by an Angel*, suggests, violence is, however, still a significant element of *Touched by an Angel*. In this episode,

McKenna is only transformed after Irene dies. Once again, death plays an essential role in provoking change.

And where is God in all this? Late in the episode just before she reveals herself as an angel, McKenna tells Monica he does not believe in God because “God requires faith and faith means risks. I don’t take risks.” (He is no Mulder.) Monica tells him about the revelation scene in the show about angels, and then she starts glowing and tells him she is an angel from God. Monica is proof God exists, which bolsters McKenna’s faith to restore his dream of being a writer. God’s authority and blessing, inherent in Monica’s encouragement, gives McKenna the confidence he needs to confront the board with his plans to change the entire network. Monica completes God’s assignment, and American television is better for it. Plus, one more person believes in God and he as an individual is better for it.

Interestingly, though, no one in the episode suggests there should be more television shows about religion or God on television. Monica does not argue for the show about angels because it will restore faith. Her pitch is based on individual behavior and individual emotion. At best, *Touched by an Angel* brings families together—together in front of the television, not together in their local church.

Martha Williamson explained the appeal of *Touched by an Angel* in a 2004 interview for the season one DVD box set:

People want to be encouraged. People want to hope. People are looking for some hope. *Touched by an Angel* doesn’t offer hope by saying, ‘This is it.’ They’re saying, ‘God is it.’ We don’t have all the answers on *Touched by an Angel*. But if you’re going to do a show about angels you have to acknowledge that God exists in it. And by doing that, it asks a lot of questions. And so, we don’t treat it as a fantasy. We treat it as a drama about real people with real problems and a real God who is there to solve them with them, to help them solve their problems. And that’s what people are responding to. It makes them feel good. It makes them feel empowered because they realize that there is in fact a power greater than themselves who may well have a better answer than they do. And we realized that

Touched by an Angel was being so successful because people felt empowered and encouraged again. People felt hopeful again.⁶⁹

Notice how much of her explanation for the show's success is about positive emotions. By Williamson's explanation, the value of the show is therapeutic. She sounds like she is pitching a self-help group. Philip Rieff's last words of his diagnosis of Western culture, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, capture Williamson's explanation perfectly: "A sense of well-being has become the end, rather than a by-product of striving after some superior communal end."⁷⁰ Indeed, the angels touch many individuals, occasionally some families, and once in a while some small communities. But Monica's assignments almost always bring about a therapeutic result in an individual rather than a revolutionary result in a community. Andrew brings dead people to heaven while Monica makes the living people feel empowered and encouraged. The result is a show that, as fans attested, made its audience feel good and even helped many viewers heal some of the pain in their lives. *Touched by an Angel*, however, falls short of using religious themes to inspire communal values. While the show suggests that faith in God might help heal broken families, it does not explain how it might help fix larger issues of brokenness in American community.

Conclusions

In 1911 the Mona Lisa was stolen from the Louvre. Rather than fill the space on the wall until the painting was recovered, curators decided to leave the blank space as a reminder of what was missing. Museum visitors lined up to see the space, more of them coming to look at where the Mona Lisa had been than had ever come when the painting was still there.

⁶⁹ *Touched by an Angel*, The Complete First Season DVD (Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2004).

⁷⁰ Rieff, 261.

Reflecting on the protagonists from these two shows about faith, Mulder would believe with all his heart that the painting could be recovered, and Scully would apply her scientific expertise in support of the search. Faith and science would partner in the search for the painting. They might never find the Mona Lisa, but they would persevere with a shared faith that together they could return the missing painting.

The angels, on the other hand, would use the blank space to teach an important lesson and inspire change in the crowds flocking to the Louvre. Monica and friends would remind the museum patrons that they took the Mona Lisa for granted when it was there, encouraging them to apply the lesson for personal transformation.

Compared to the hopeful cooperation depicted in *The X-Files*, *Touched by an Angel*'s vision was cynical. The suggestion that real change could only occur through death is the language of radical revolutionaries. *Touched by an Angel* brought about revolutions not of society but of the self. The angels, despite their access to divine power, were operating on a small scale. It would take a truly traumatic event to bring about a revolution in the lives of an entire nation. It would take an event that everyone felt a profound connection to. It would take something like 9/11.

Touched by an Angel foreshadows some of the hopeful proclamations of national change seen after 9/11. First and foremost, for those who, in the weeks after 9/11, proclaimed an "end to the age of irony," the series seems to be exactly the kind of earnest culture they hoped would proliferate.⁷¹ As fanciful as the show's premise was, you could tell that the show was always

⁷¹ Credit for being the first/foremost to pronounce an "end of irony" after 9/11 is usually given to either Graydon Carter, the editor of *Vanity Fair* or Roger Rosenblatt, an essayist for *Time* magazine. On September 17, 2001, Carter was quoted on (now defunct) *Inside.com*, "There's going to be a seismic change. I think it's the end of the age of irony." On September 24, Rosenblatt's essay in *Time* said, "One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony." (Roger Rosenblatt, "The Age of Irony Comes to an End," *Time*, September 24, 2001.) In fact, the earliest pronouncement of irony's death came in the Canadian newspaper, *The*

taking itself seriously; indeed, it would not have worked if it had not done so. Roger Rosenblatt, in one of the most famous 9/11 essays hoping for an end of irony, called for something similar in post 9/11 America. He felt that ironic detachment had threatened earnest belief, decent behavior, and ordinary living. *Touched by an Angel* celebrated the same things. Weekly, it depicted Rosenblatt's and others' hopes for post-9/11 America: belief and ordinary living could only be achieved to their fullest through the emotional disruption of death.

Catastrophe on the scale of 9/11 is the greatest threat in *The X-Files*, but tragedy is consistently a herald of profound personal change in *Touched by an Angel*. Mulder and Scully hope death can be averted. The angels represent hope in death—hope that death will bring about change that will make the lives of survivors better, and the survivors themselves better spouses, parents, and children.

To be sure, *The X-Files* is a dark show in mood and worldview, and the series comes to an end in a cynical place. Mulder and Scully are chased from the F.B.I. and seem to have failed in their efforts to forestall a future alien invasion. But there is still much hope to be found. Mulder and Scully have not changed the world, but they have changed a few colleagues along the way, including some of the most skeptical opponents of their work.⁷² Most importantly, the heroes Mulder and Scully live on, themselves changed for the better, and still searching, still growing. Faith and science have been lovingly strengthened by each other.

The X-Files offers hope in darkness. *Touched by an Angel* encourages hope of avoiding darkness. The god of *The X-Files* is the creator, shaping human history from somewhere out

National Post. In an essay published September 12, Andrew Coyne wrote, "The Age of Irony died yesterday." (Andrew Coyne, "We are Not Afraid," *National Post*, September 12, 2001.) The etymology of the phrase is helpfully sketched out in Eric Randall, "The 'Death of Irony,' and Its Many Reincarnations," *The Wire*, September 9, 2011, accessed October 6, 2014, <http://www.thewire.com/national/2011/09/death-irony-and-its-many-reincarnations/42298/>.

⁷² Examples include Scully herself; their boss, Assistant Director Skinner; Mulder's replacement, Agent Dogget; and even the X-Files' great institutional enemy in its final seasons, FBI Deputy Director Kersh.

there. God in *Touched by an Angel* is the therapeutic healer who has come near, sending his counselors to engage in deeply personal ministry. God in *Touched by an Angel* is the god of the New Testament, working case by case, person by person, while God in *The X-Files* is the god of the Old Testament, prophesying hope amidst a world of danger and terror, calling for the culture warriors to put down their arms and work together. God in *The X-Files* creates life *and* destroys life, but Mulder and Scully find their hope in the chance that together they may understand the purpose of humankind. God in *Touched by an Angel* uses the sorrows of life to provoke individual change. Only when death comes can God's angels get any work done.

Chapter 5

Spending Eternity with The Simpsons: Springfield as TV's Most Heavenly Community

This Town Ain't So Bad!
—Bart Simpson¹

Angels and aliens come from the sky, from the stars, perhaps from other planes of existence. But the most successful vision of community depicted on nineties American television is found in the clouds. Several billowy white puffs set against a cheery blue sky fade in from black, accompanied by the familiar harmony of an angelic choir, leading us to Springfield, home of the Simpson family.² The show is about an imperfect bunch of characters. The family and the town are equally dysfunctional, and yet both have achieved an equilibrium as their imperfections are balanced out by the basic, consistent pleasures of town life and familial love. Amidst and despite its cutting parody of the traditional family sitcom, the cartoonish unreality of *The Simpsons* depicts a utopian world, silly, strange, and yet, for all its detail, familiar and perhaps attainable in our reality.

While at first glance both the Simpsons and their home town seem hopelessly flawed, viewed over the many years the show has been on the air, the community trends towards perfection. And time is a resource *The Simpsons* has uniquely enjoyed; the show began its 27th season in 2015. In the long run, Springfield seems like a rather nice place to live, and the Simpsons start to look like an exemplary American family.

¹ “Lemon of Troy,” *The Simpsons*, season six, episode 24 (Fox, May 14, 1995).

² While most contemporary shows, including every other show this project focuses on, begin with an opening scene before rolling their opening credits, every episode of *The Simpsons* starts with its opening credits.

On one level, the show mocks American life. On a deeper level, though, the show offers a detailed image of a better version of America. The first level is an impressionistic caricature that emphasizes dysfunction in both family and community. *The Simpsons* is a satire, and most of its jokes highlight flaws, contradictions, and peculiarities across the breadth of American culture. The second level offers a detailed portrait of the family and their town that emerges over the multiple decades the show has been on the air. The long run redeems the characters and their community; their imperfections seem less important, and their innate goodness shines through. Each episode of *The Simpsons* takes quick, brilliant jabs at America's faults, but the show's longevity reveals the characters' consistency of love and affection for one another and their town. Compared to the America it satirizes, Springfield is a utopia. The show's opening sequence, one of the most recognizable introductions in television history, emphasizes the rich community and loving family the characters enjoy on *The Simpsons*.

The Family Sitcom Genre

As the opening sequence begins, the title of the show expands from a central point on the screen into a blue sky, immediately emphasizing the titular family that makes up its core unit. Every scripted television series explores the complications of a group of characters interacting with each other within the context of their created circumstance. As several of the shows examined have shown, even when a series depicts co-workers or friends who are not related by blood or marriage, the characters inevitably bind together, developing an intimacy through shared experience that results in a sort of surrogate family. Thus, the family is the basic unit of most television shows, and the family sitcom is the most basic generic form of television.³ *The*

³ At least four hundred different sitcoms have appeared on prime time American television, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of which were domestic family sitcoms. Richard Butsch, "Five Decades and Three Hundred Sitcoms

Simpsons is a parody of sitcoms, but it also invites a nostalgia for the classic domestic family sitcom that was seemingly out-of-date in the nineties as *Seinfeld*'s popularity led a surge in similar sitcoms built around friends-as-family.

While less prominent in certain periods, family sitcoms remained successful throughout television history, through the nineties and well into the 21st century. The most successful family sitcoms of the nineties, *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-97), *Home Improvement* (ABC, 1991-99), and *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS, 1996-2005) were all built around the existing cultural persona of their stand-up comic stars—respectively, Roseanne Barr, Tim Allen, and Ray Romano. Other family sitcoms rested on a specific premise. Though he did not appear until midway through the first season, *Family Matters* (ABC, 1989-97; CBS, 1997-98) became a hit show about Steve Urkel, the geek teen next door. *Full House* (ABC, 1987-95) was about a widowed father of three who invites his brother-in-law and his best friend to live with him.

The widower premise has proven successful in past iterations of the domestic family sitcom, including *The Andy Griffith Show* (CBS, 1960-68) and *My Three Sons* (ABC, 1960-65; CBS, 1965-72). Those and other single-parent shows, including *Full House*, often featured a surrogate character to replace the missing parent, thus “reconstituting the nuclear family.”⁴ But by the 1970s family sitcoms began to imagine increasingly varied deviations from the nuclear

about Class and Gender,” in *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*, ed. Gary R. R. Edgerton and Brian Geoffrey Rose (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 111.

⁴ Paul A. Cantor, “*The Simpsons*: Atomistic Politics and the Nuclear Family,” *Political Theory* 27, No. 6 (Dec. 1999), 736.

family norm.⁵ At the same time, the norms of the American family were changing, reshaped by increases in divorce rates, dual income households, and various other factors.⁶

Meanwhile, marriage and parenthood became less important bonds for sitcom characters in general. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977) epitomized the workplace-as-family conception that its production company, MTM Productions, explored in both sitcoms and dramas.⁷ *Cheers* (NBC, 1982-1993), an even bigger ratings hit, went even further in avoiding depictions of its characters' domestic families. Spouses, if the marriage was still intact, were often invisible nuisances to be commiserated over within the community of the bar (where everybody knew everyone's name). The parents in *Seinfeld* were the butt of many jokes, often, like spouses in *Cheers*, a liability and barrier to a happier life.

Compared to other family sitcoms, the premise of *The Simpsons* is simple. The show is about a working class family of five living in Springfield. There is no other layer to the show's essential ingredients, nor is there any complication of their family make-up. The people of the family and the town themselves are the complication, riddled with personal and relational flaws. Homer, the father, is dimwitted and selfish. Marge, the mother, is constantly anxious; her catchphrase is a concerned groan. Bart, the son, is a trouble maker. Lisa, the middle child, is isolated because of her precocious intelligence. Maggie is simply an infant.

⁵ Cantor, 1999. As examples, Cantor lists *Alice* (1976-1985), *Love, Sidney* (1981-1983), *Punky Brewster* (1984-1986), and *My Two Dads* (1987-1990). Cantor also notes one logical conclusion of this trend in another Fox show, *Party of Five* (1994-2000), which depicted kids raising themselves after both parents died.

⁶ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997). Coontz has built her career on adding historical and sociological context to the typical array of marriage statistics. For example, she remarks, "The problems facing inner-city families who don't have access to jobs, parks, libraries, or safe streets are different from those facing working parents who are saddled with overtime and can't take parental leave or sick days to care for their kids" (8). Coontz argues that in a variety of ways "marriage is certainly a *transformed* institution, and it plays a smaller role than ever before in organizing social and personal life" (31).

⁷ Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age* (New York: Continuum, 1996). MTM's role in propagating the workplace-as-family theme is also discussed in chapters one and two.

This is a flawed family, living in a flawed town. But the show depicts this family and its community with love and affection. The characters overcome their flaws as they grapple for, and often achieve, happiness. By contrast, individual flaws of the characters and the people they encounter drive the plots in *Seinfeld*. Jerry and his friends would be happier in a world of isolation. Family, work, romance...everything on *Seinfeld* is flawed. “Nothing” is the more attractive option. *Seinfeld*, then, agrees and even celebrates the state of community Robert Putnam describes in *Bowling Alone*; Americans are drifting away from civic participation, and that is just fine for Jerry and his friends.⁸ On the other hand, the Springfield of *The Simpsons*, for all the town’s imperfections, enjoys a vibrant community life belying the description of America in *Bowling Alone*. As Bart remarks in one episode, “This town ain’t so bad!”⁹

The Simpsons: Style and Form

There is one obvious characteristic that sets *The Simpsons* apart from most sitcoms. It is a cartoon. Created by Matt Groening, the Simpson family originally appeared in cartoon shorts on *The Tracey Ullman Show* (Fox, 1987-1990), a half-hour sketch comedy program on the fledgling Fox network.¹⁰ Groening’s drawing and coloring combine to create a particular smoothness that is immediately noticeable in the first image of *The Simpsons*’s opening sequence: a cluster of unthreatening white clouds set against a striking shade of blue. It is a bright sky blue, so bright it is unrealistic. Even before the title appears in the same shade as the Simpsons’ yellow skin color, the clouds set against that blue establish the palette for the entire show: bright, predominately

⁸ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

⁹ In the episode, “Lemon of Troy,” Bart rallies a group of children and a couple dads to help recover a stolen lemon tree, a landmark in Springfield, from rival town, Shelbyville. In this episode, as in many, civic pride unites both family and friends to work for the good of the community.

¹⁰ To be precise, the cartoon family is Groening’s creation, but he is one of three co-creators of the series. Famed writer and director James L. Brooks and writer Sam Simon are the show’s other two co-creators.

primary colors selected to resemble reality's natural, more varied palette, but painted, along with the rounded, well-defined black lines, to emphasize the show's cartoonishness.

The effect of the animation style of *The Simpsons* appears in starker clarity relative to animated sitcoms that appeared in the wake of its success. Compared to the harsh, hand cut edges of *South Park* or the impressionistic lines and muted colors of Mike Judge's nineties cartoons *Beavis and Butthead* (MTV, 1993-97) and *King of the Hill*, there is far less cynicism inherent in *The Simpsons*'s animation style.¹¹ Quite the opposite, the color and design is far cheerier than its contemporary primetime cartoons. The writing is the show's primary source of satirical negativity; the drawing and coloring provide the sweetness that has helped make the satire so consistently enjoyable for so many years.

The Simpsons has always aspired to be closer to the aesthetic of a sitcom than to a cartoon, as evidenced by comparing it to the cartoon that exists within the *Simpsons* universe: *The Itchy and Scratchy Show*. While *The Simpsons* has plenty of animated violence and absurdity, it does not match the cartoonish excess of *Itchy and Scratchy*. Animals on *The Simpsons*, with very rare exceptions, behave like animals, unlike the talking cat and mouse on *Itchy and Scratchy*. Also, *Itchy and Scratchy* episodes, like most classic cartoons which arose as movie theater shorts, are considerably briefer than *The Simpsons*, which fits a half-hour block on the television schedule.

¹¹ *South Park* has aired on *Comedy Central* since 1997. *Beavis and Butthead* ran on *MTV* from 1993-97. *King of the Hill* accompanied *The Simpsons* on Sunday night's on Fox for most of its run between 1997 and 2010. The relative aesthetic beauty of these series is debatable, but certainly Matt Groening's *The Simpsons* has the brightest, roundest, and smoothest animation among its contemporaries. *Family Guy* (1999-2003, 2005-present), another Fox Sunday night cartoon, is most similar in cartoon style to *The Simpsons*, but there is a meanness to the character models in *Family Guy* that is much more muted in *The Simpsons*. For example, Chris Griffith is bulbous and ape-like, while his counterpart, Bart Simpson, is more defined by his playful head than his own, more subtle potbelly.

Yet, unlike live-action sitcoms, *The Simpsons* exists outside the laws of aging that leave their marks on human actors. As the cartoon churns on well into its third decade on the air this feature increasingly distinguishes it from other primetime shows. While each episode is set in the present, the Simpsons never get older.¹² This is an underappreciated aspect of the show's aesthetic and a critical element for its meaning and message. The four-fingered, yellow-shaded people of Springfield go on with their routines in the same jobs, occupying the exact same place in society, week after week, apparently for eternity. To be sure, secondary characters do die on rare occasion, but, setting aside network programming considerations as well as the mortality of the voice actors, one could imagine and even expect the five members of the Simpsons family to live *forever* on television. They are immortal.¹³ And with that immortality, they do what they might be expected to do; they have an endless stream of adventures and misadventures, experiencing as many different types of wild scenarios as the show's writers can imagine. To that end, geography, too, is no barrier, because it costs just as much to make an episode of *The Simpsons* that takes place in outer space as it does to make one that remains entirely within their home.

The Simpsons can and does take advantage of the limitless possibilities of the cartoon medium, but every episode remains anchored in the familiar via the routines of the opening sequence. The clouds part, and the angels sing the title of the show, "*The Simpsons*," and then Danny Elfman's bouncy, syncopated, lyric-less theme kicks in as Springfield comes into view.

¹² That is not to say that the show exists outside of time. In fact, the show continues to engage with changes over time in the real world even while its characters remain unaffected by aging. So, for example, a 2008 episode can flashback to Homer and Marge's courtship in the nineties supposedly years before they married and conceived their children, even though in the real world's nineties, their children were already born on the show. "That 90's Show," *The Simpsons*, season 19, episode 11 (Fox, January 27, 2008).

¹³ The characters' cartoon modeling did go through some changes in the early years, and the show was first broadcast in HD in 2009. So viewers do have some clues suggesting the passage of time, but these factors are external to the world of Springfield.

The camera does not tilt down to descend on the town from the clouds.¹⁴ Instead, we head straight into the yellow “P” in *The Simpsons* as if passing through a portal in the sky. To be precise, then, it seems that Springfield really is located in the heavens and not down on earth.¹⁵

Passing through the “P,” the very first thing to come into view is one of the giant cooling towers of Springfield’s nuclear power plant. As this post-industrial symbol looms in the foreground, the rest of the energy complex comes into view, along with the heaping mounds of the Springfield Tire Yard. Though no flames or smoke are visible in the traditional opening sequence, the tire yard is better known as the Springfield Tire Fire for the rubber that has been burning continuously since perhaps 1966.¹⁶ The mound of tires and the cooling towers in the foreground are compositionally balanced by picturesque green hills in the background. The town thus lies in the balance between the waste and grime of human development and scenic plenty of American nature.

¹⁴ I will refer to Springfield as a “town” throughout this chapter, although an argument could be made that it is a small city. The geography and demographics of Springfield are ambiguous on the show, presumably to make the setting feel like a typical American town. Occasionally a comically impossible fact will emerge about Springfield. For example, the West Springfield area of town was once described to be three times the size of Texas. “Half-Decent Proposal,” *The Simpsons*, season 13, episode 10 (Fox, February 10, 2001). In any given episode, Springfield has exactly the space, infrastructure, and features the plot requires. In one episode, the characters pass a sign that indicates the town’s population is 30,720. “Poppa’s Got a Brand New Badge,” *The Simpsons*, season 13, episode 22 (Fox, May 22, 2002). Regardless of the accuracy of that sign, Springfield’s culture is more like that of a town rather than a city, particularly in the familiarity the characters have with one another.

¹⁵ Springfield’s spatial relationship to our world is seemingly confirmed by the episode “Treehouse of Horror VI,” the sixth episode of the seventh season. In the third of three self-contained segments, Homer stumbles into a three-dimensional animated world. In the end, the first live action scene of the series, he escapes to our world, where human pedestrians gawk with understandable amazement at the animated Homer strolling down the sidewalk. Homer enters our world by falling from the sky.

¹⁶ News anchor Kent Brockman reports on the fire’s 25th anniversary in “Flaming Moe’s,” *The Simpsons*, episode 10, season three, (Fox, November 21, 1991), although a similar sign in a later episode, “The Old Man and the C Student,” *The Simpsons*, episode 20, season 10 (Fox, April 25, 1999), says “Est. 1989,” a reference to the year *The Simpsons* first aired.

Within the context of the opening sequence, the Springfield Nuclear Plant, along with the tire farm, is an aesthetic scar that diminishes the town's natural beauty.¹⁷ Within the series, the nuclear plant is regularly used as a symbol of the evils of big business, just as its owner, Montgomery Burns, embodies the evils of excess wealth. As evidenced later in the opening sequence, Homer does not enjoy working at the plant, but, as Homer himself admits, the power plant is "the only place in town that a man like me could make it."¹⁸ In a season two episode, Bart catches a three-eyed fish downstream from the plant.¹⁹ The episode highlights a fact repeatedly suggested throughout the series: the plant is a hazardous environment to work in and a disaster waiting to happen to the town. But Homer's job sustains the Simpson's family's existence and the plant, besides supplying the town's electricity, is probably the largest employer in Springfield.²⁰ Mr. Burns and his nuclear plant is are necessary evils. Springfield has made the same bargain of industrial towns around the world, past and present, accepting environmental costs in exchange for economic benefits.²¹

As the camera tracks in toward the town, a third structure briefly comes into view in the foreground. Next to the tire farm behind the nuclear plant is the Springfield Prison, the more or less permanent home of several of the show's recurring characters. Springfield's convicts are

¹⁷ Leonard Rifas argues, within the context of the entire series, the nuclear plant is the "highest expression" of "anti-nuclear mass entertainment." Leonard Rifas, "Cartooning and Nuclear Power: From Industry Advertising to Activist Uprising and Beyond," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 40, no. 2 (April 2007), 259.

¹⁸ "And Maggie Makes Three," *The Simpsons*, episode 13, season six (Fox, January 22, 1995). This episode beautifully captures the balance of Homer's qualities as a parent, both his flaws and his ultimate goodness.

¹⁹ "Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish," *The Simpsons*, episode four, season two (Fox, November 1, 1990.)

²⁰ Of course, Springfield is eventually revealed to be the location of numerous thriving businesses, from the animation studio where *The Itchy and Scratchy Show* is created to the large brewery that makes the popular *Duff* beer. Their proximity, though, is more a function of storytelling necessity for specific episodes. The nuclear power plant, the only big business visible in the opening credits, is also the only big business that is routinely a part of Springfield's fabric of life.

²¹ More specifically, the show thus anticipates the potentially damaging deal many American towns have made by selling rights for big energy companies to extract natural gas through the controversial process of "fracking."

repeat offenders; the stick-up robber Snake and the murderous Sideshow Bob, two of the most notorious criminals on *The Simpsons*, are never truly rehabilitated and yet they keep returning to the streets, sometimes by escaping but just as often released by the justice system. The penal system is the destination for convicted criminals on *Law & Order* and *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, but neither show explores its effectiveness. On *The Simpsons*, America's prison system is mocked.

Despite its ineffectiveness, the prison is a natural part of Springfield's balanced ecosystem. Crime is one of many imperfections that is not going away. Snake might be captured by his nemesis, the lovably befuddled Police Chief Wiggum, in one episode but a few episodes later he will be back at the Kwik-E-Mart, the town's convenience store, robbing its friendly owner, Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, at gunpoint. This is a more cynical portrayal of the justice system than *Law & Order*. The incompetent Wiggum is no Lennie Briscoe, and there is not a district attorney of Jack McCoy's quality to be seen. And yet, the Springfield of *The Simpsons* is a far safer place than the New York of *Law & Order*.

While the sources of pollution, environmental and social, seem to loom over the entire town, Springfield's residents have an accessible escape in the nearby rolling green hills. Thus, the first look at the town immediately suggests the show's two levels; Springfield's flaws are obvious in the foreground, while its more substantial, positive attributes are less noticeable in the distance. Occasionally the Simpsons do venture into the hills and forests for recreation. While sometimes they do find fun and relaxation, quite often the wilderness is not as pleasant as hoped. In "The Call of the Simpsons," a family camping trip turns into a disaster, with the group getting separated and lost after Homer drives their newly acquired used recreational vehicle off a cliff.²² Homer has several miserable misadventures in the mountains, including a disastrous company

²² "The Call of the Simpsons," *The Simpsons*, episode seven, season one (Fox, February 18, 1990).

team-building excursion on Mt. Useful in the middle of winter and a difficult but ultimately rather successful attempt to climb Springfield's highest mountain, The Muderhorn.²³ Still, Lisa in particular appreciates the value of the public parks; in "Lisa the Tree-Hugger," when loggers threaten Springfield's oldest redwood tree, she comes to its defense.²⁴ In the end though, whenever the Simpsons leave Springfield, whether for the nearby parks, forests, and mountains or distant states and countries, they inevitably reach the conclusion that they would rather be back home in Springfield. Indeed, in this opening sequence, home is their destination.²⁵

Springfield's suburbs are not immediately visible in the first view of the town; blocky, Cézanne-like office buildings take up the space between the industrial foreground and rural background. In the next cut, the camera moves down a side-walked street that ends in a "T" in front of Springfield Elementary School where we will find the first member of the family. Behind the school there are more hills, this time dotted with houses accessible by roads switch-backing up the steep slopes. The suburbs remain in the distance, but the Simpsons will get there in the end.

Bart at School

As the camera approaches the school, it passes an unidentified building on the right and the well-located "Candy Most Dandy" on the left.²⁶ The delights of the outside world seem far away for Bart; the camera jump-cuts to the school's front door then pans to the first window on

²³ "Mountain of Madness," *The Simpsons*, season eight, episode 12 (Fox, February 2, 1997); "King of the Hill," *The Simpsons*, season nine, episode 23 (Fox, May 3, 1998).

²⁴ "Lisa the Tree-Hugger," *The Simpsons*, season 12, episode four (Fox, November 9, 2000).

²⁵ *The Simpsons* thus reverses the direction of several well-known sitcom opening sequences which show the family exiting the house to go their separate ways. See for example the opening sequences of *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS, 1957-63) and *The Munsters* (CBS, 1964-66).

²⁶ Only the words "Candy" and "Dandy" are visible in the opening sequence, and the store is barely featured in any episode storylines, but the full name is visible in at least two episodes, "The Telltale Head," *The Simpsons*, season one, episode eight (Fox, February 25, 1990); and "The Daughter Also Rises," *The Simpsons*, season 23, episode 13 (Fox, February 12, 2012).

the right to find the fourth grader laboring at the chalkboard. Bart, suffering the punishment of an unknown teacher for an unseen deed, has been rewriting the same sentence over and over. A few seconds after the camera finds him writing, the clock on the wall reaches 3:00 and the school bell rings to signal his release.

Even most of the shortened versions of the opening sequence find Bart at the same place every week, or even more frequently considering the ubiquity of *The Simpsons* in syndication.²⁷ But the opening sequence does not simply repeat the same *moment* before every broadcast of *The Simpsons*. Even while the animation suggests the Simpsons family is trapped in time, stuck at the same age, three regular changes to the opening sequence signal that they are not caught in a loop. The beats of the afternoon routine remain forever the same, but Bart's chalkboard punishment, Lisa's musical improvisation, and the family's reunion on their couch are always different. Thus, each opening sequence depicts the same routines, but the changed details suggest the audience is witnessing a different weekday in the characters' lives.

Before each episode, the chalkboard reveals Bart's latest act of rebellion. A few examples:

- "The truth is not out there"²⁸
- "I was not the inspiration for 'Kramer'"²⁹
- "I was not touched 'there' by an angel"³⁰

²⁷ *The Simpsons* was syndicated only on local broadcast television stations until 2013 when Twentieth Century Fox sold the cable syndication and video-on-demand rights to FXX, keeping the show within Fox's corporate family. In the early nineties, Fox affiliates managed to buy exclusive rights to run the show's library as long as the show was on the air. When that deal was done, few would have imagined the show would be the hit in syndication it turned out to be, or that new episodes would still airing over a quarter century later. Cynthia Littleton, "'The Simpsons' Lands \$750 Mil Cable Syndication, VOD Pact with FXX," *Variety*, November 15, 2013.

²⁸ "The Springfield Files," *The Simpsons*, season eight, episode 10 (Fox, January 12, 1997). This episode featured the characters Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, crossing over from *The X-Files*.

²⁹ "Natural Born Kissers," season nine, episode 25 (Fox, May 17, 1998). This episode, the season finale, aired three days after the *Seinfeld* series finale.

The chalkboard introduces Bart as a problematic prankster and a liar. He is a wild child, but he is also silly and mostly harmless.

In many episodes, Bart is causing problems for his teacher, his principal, and his parents. And yet, to the chagrin of parents and teachers concerned at the idea of Bart serving as a role model, this little spiky-haired rebel was the early fan favorite during *The Simpsons*' initial rise to fame in the early nineties.³¹ Schools around the nation rushed to ban T-shirts with his image and phrases like "I'm Bart Simpson, who the hell are you?" The national department store chain J.C. Penney's declined to cash in on the young scoundrel's popularity, announcing it would not carry a shirt with a picture of Bart and the phrase, "Underachiever and proud of it!"³²

But Bart would not go away. Midway through the show's second season Bart was named *Entertainment Weekly*'s "Entertainer of the Year" and also made *People*'s list of the most intriguing people of 1990.³³ Newspapers noted both white and black kids embraced the yellow hero, and unlicensed T-shirts began appearing depicting Bart as black.³⁴ But the Bart Simpson fad did not last, or at least it did not sustain the heights it reached in the first few years of the 1990s. As the show reached its tenth season, media retrospectives emphasized that the show had by then become widely appreciated not simply for Bart's youthful rebellion but rather for its

³⁰ "Days of Wine and D'oh'ses," *The Simpsons*, season 11, episode 19 (Fox, April 9, 2000).

³¹ Sharman Stein, "Bart: It's Buy Him Or Bash Him," *Chicago Tribune*, June 3, 1990, 11.

³² Ruben Castaneda, "Bart Simpson: Children's Hero, Educators' Menace," *The Washington Post*, May 29, 1990, B1.

³³ "Bart Simpson Entertainer of Year," *The Sun*, Dec 26, 1990, 2C.

³⁴ Elinor Burkett, "Bart's So Cool, How Could He be White? Blacks Adopt Simpson Son as a Brother," *Phoenix Gazette*, July 19, 1990, D2; Valli Herman, "Hey Dude! Multiethnic Appeal Fits Bart Simpson to a T Bootleg Shirt Sales Show That 'Superhero' has Achieved Ability to Leap Across Racial Boundaries," *Orange County Register*, July 09, 1990, E01; "When Life Imitates Bart," *Newsweek*, July 22, 1990. Peter Parisi's study of the "Black Bart" phenomenon argues the appropriation shows that "African-American culture by definition and necessity works in relation to dominant culture products. But the result is often distinct cultural invention... The maneuver [the transformation of Bart from yellow to black] may engender group affirmations of some cultural significance. ...the Black Bart T-shirt...enhances African-American identity." Peter Parisi, "'Black Bart' Simpson: Appropriation and Revitalization in Commodity Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 1 (Summer 1993), 125-142.

depiction of a loving family.³⁵ And, in 2000, when Bart finds “underachiever and proud of it” written in his permanent school file, he rolls his eyes and wonders, “How old is this thing?”³⁶

In fact, Bart always had his defenders. In the midst of T-shirt ban craze, the *Washington Post* found one teacher who thought kids appreciated Bart’s individuality. All of the students in her classes of fifth and sixth graders with learning disabilities loved him because “Bart doesn’t care what people think of him... They think Bart is really smart, he just doesn’t show it.” Paul A. Cantor, one of many scholars who defended *The Simpsons* against its critics, pointed out, “Bart is an American icon, an updated version of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn rolled into one. For all his troublemaking—precisely because of his troublemaking—Bart behaves just the way a young boy is supposed to in American mythology, from Dennis the Menace comics to the Our Gang comedies.”³⁷

It is understandable that schools would ban T-shirts with obscenities, but it was the culture war context that exacerbated the anti-*Simpsons* attitudes in the early nineties. Even President Bush piled on, famously telling the 1992 Convention of National Religious Broadcasters that the nation should be “closer to the Waltons than the Simpsons.”³⁸ Different

³⁵ Seth Sutel, “Fox Hit a Homer with ‘The Simpsons’ a Decade Ago - The Rest Is Hysterical,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 13, 2000, D1; M. S. Mason, “Why We Still Love ‘The Simpsons,’” *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 14, 2000, 13.

³⁶ “Skinner’s Sense of Snow,” *The Simpsons*, season 12, episode eight (Fox, December 17, 2000).

³⁷ Cantor, 738. Cantor’s defense of *The Simpsons* is described and quoted in James Warren, “*The Simpsons*: Role Models for Us All: Show Promotes Family Values, Culture Prof Says,” *National Post*, June 23, 2000, B5.

³⁸ George H.W. Bush, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters,” January 27, 1992, accessed June 3, 2015, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=20540>. Besides the original audience, the full context of this famous critique is also worth noting: “The next value I speak of must be forever cast in stone. I speak of decency, the moral courage to say what is right and condemn what is wrong. And we need a Nation closer to the Waltons than the Simpsons, an America that rejects the incivility, the tide of incivility, and the tide of intolerance.” Before the very next episode of *The Simpsons* on January 30 (a rerun of “Stark Raving Dad,” the first episode of season three originally broadcast September 19, 1991) the creators inserted a clip of the family watching Bush speak. After Bush’s comment, Bart quips, “Hey, we’re just like the Waltons. We’re praying for an end to the depression too!”

groups co-opted Bart's connotations for their own ends. Unlicensed T-shirt makers embraced his rebelliousness while family values activists pointed to him as an example of America's flaws.

In the first years of *The Simpsons*'s fame, Bart was over-simplified as an anti-authority figure, but over time he repeatedly demonstrates much goodness to his family, friends, and community, undermining the inherent danger some critics thought they saw. Even in the very first episode of the show, Bart displays his inner virtue, loyally helping his father solve the family's financial crises threatening their Christmas celebration.³⁹ In the opening sequence, Bart dutifully carries out his punishment; it is a price worth paying to be the jokester who prizes the gift of joy over the imposed rules.

Alone in the classroom, part of Bart's punishment is isolation from his peers. There is also no teacher to be seen to make sure Bart sticks to his task, but he keeps writing anyway. Contrast Bart's dutiful acceptance of his punishment with the anti-adult rage expressed by the five teens serving Saturday detention in *The Breakfast Club* (1985). In fact, practically all of writer/director John Hughes' body of work explored the utopian possibilities of a world with little to no adult oversight, from *The Breakfast Club* to *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) to *Home Alone* (1990). Hughes' logical conclusion came in *Baby's Day Out* (1994), when the titular hero thwarted a gang of kidnappers long before he was even potty-trained. Bart's adventures inevitably intersect with the adult world, and while he may never learn any lessons, he nonetheless accepts both the consequences of his actions and his role as a child in an adult-controlled world. Ultimately, there is some mutual respect between Bart and his parents and teachers. On some level, he understands he is going to be an adult someday, and the adults perhaps remember that they used to be kids. That mutual respect is absent in John Hughes' films.

³⁹ "Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire," *The Simpsons*, season one, episode one (Fox, December 17, 1989).

For now, the only witnesses are the television audience, laughing at whatever prank Bart is promising never to do again. The punishment celebrates the mischief, a sort of signature on his latest work of art. Week after week, he keeps writing on the chalkboard because he has earned it, in more ways than one.

Bart is delighted to be released from his confines. When the bell rings he bolts for the door. It has all been one single, cut-free shot since the camera took a close up of the school door before moving to find Bart through the window. Now, still without cutting, the camera has to quickly pan back to the front doors to catch Bart exploding out to the sidewalk on his skateboard, waving his arms to control his exuberant exit in the manner of an expert rider, not a novice. The dynamic camera movement matches the glee on Bart's face. It is a moment of joy for Bart and the viewer. Bart's energy increases the dynamism of the opening sequence, beginning the family's travel adventure it depicts.

The skateboard is the perfect emblem for Bart. Both Bart and skateboarding shook off (sold out, some might say) *most* of their anti-authority connotations by the end of the nineties. In 1995 ESPN arranged and aired the first X-Games, an Olympics-like annual competition for so-called extreme sports including BMX biking, motorcycle dirt racing, and skateboarding. Shaun White is perhaps the biggest celebrity to emerge from the ESPN-driven culture of extreme sports. Originally a skateboarder, White went on to win gold medals in the Olympics in snowboarding, once the winterized version of skateboarding became an official Olympic sport. White's mentor, Tony Hawk, was the first big X-games celebrity and arguably (especially according to the ESPN promotional machine) the greatest skateboarder ever. In the last X-games of the nineties, Hawk became the first skateboarder to launch from a halfpipe and complete two-

and-a-half spins in midair.⁴⁰ New versions of the skateboarding video game series named after Hawk continued to hit the shelves in 2015. Hawk became rich because he was the best at a sport at the very moment that sport shifted from an illegal, anti-authority act to one with official competitions, sponsors, fans, and merchandising. Now there are thousands of skate parks inviting boarders and skaters to play in a specifically designated area, thus signifying social acceptance of the activity. When Bart first burst out of Springfield Elementary in 1990 and skateboarded down the sidewalk, the sport still had rebellious connotations. By the end of the decade, that image had faded.

“I will not instigate revolution,” Bart wrote on the chalkboard before one first season episode.⁴¹ One man’s dangerous instigator is another man’s revolutionary hero. As he flies out the doors past the school’s American flag, Bart left one observer behind in the classroom; to the right of the chalkboard there is a portrait of a white-wigged head. The greatest American revolutionary, George Washington, silently looks on, like Bart, a symbol of both rebellion and, at the bell’s toll, freedom.

Homer at Work

Almost simultaneously, Bart’s father is also laboring under the watchful eye of a white-haired old man. Somewhere inside the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant, Homer is wearing a hazmat suit, carefully lifting a small glowing green rod with long prongs. There is no ceiling over his head—just an endless maze of crisscrossing pipes disappearing into the darkness far above. A “Caution” sign dangles from one of the pipes behind Homer. Another sign, “Be Careful,” hangs just below a window looking out on Homer’s work space from behind his back.

⁴⁰ David Fischer, “The Pied Piper of Skateboarding,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1999, accessed August 1, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/sports/year_in_sports/06.27.html.

⁴¹ “Moaning Lisa,” *The Simpsons*, season one, episode six (Fox, February 11, 1990).

Plant owner and town billionaire Montgomery Burns is standing in the room on the other side of the window, inspecting plans of some kind with his doting assistant, Wayland Smithers. These are the first pair of secondary characters to appear in the opening sequence. In the moment, they represent the power of ownership and bureaucratic management, respectively.

But Burns and Smithers have come to mean much more on the show. In the early seasons, Smithers hated Homer, often berating him to Mr. Burns as, “That’s Homer Simpson, one of your [condescending plural noun] from sector 7G.”⁴² When Homer is briefly promoted in a season two episode, Smithers seethes with jealousy throughout the episode and delights in Homer’s eventual downfall.⁴³ In *The Simpsons* arcade game, released in 1991 at perhaps the depths of Smithers’ reputation, he is the arch-villain whom the Simpsons family chases through the game after he kidnaps Maggie.⁴⁴ Over time, Smithers’ reputation has softened as his characterization has deepened. On rare occasions he will go behind his boss’s back to help the Simpsons or other characters pursue some just causes.⁴⁵ The farther he gets from his job—and his secret, unrequited lust for Mr. Burns—the happier he seems to be.

Perhaps that has something to do with Mr. Burns. He is the most evil character on the show, as best demonstrated in one of the most famous episodes of the series, “Who Shot Mr. Burns?”⁴⁶ In the season six finale, an unseen assailant shoots Burns in the chest. The season seven premiere revealed that baby Maggie Simpson pulled the trigger, but as both episodes emphasized, Burns’s sinister behavior meant everyone in Springfield had a motive to kill the

⁴² Credit goes to Simpsons Wiki for suggesting this phrasing formula. “Wayland Smithers, Jr.,” *Simpsons Wiki*, accessed May 6, 2015, http://simpsons.wikia.com/wiki/Waylon_Smithers,_Jr.

⁴³ “Simpson and Delilah,” *The Simpsons*, episode two, season two (Fox, October 18, 1990).

⁴⁴ *The Simpsons*, Arcade Game (Konami, 1991).

⁴⁵ For example, he alerts Bart and Lisa to the election fraud Sideshow Bob perpetrated to win the mayor’s office in “Sideshow Bob Roberts,” *The Simpsons*, episode five, season six (Fox, October 9, 1994).

⁴⁶ “Who Shot Mr. Burns?, Part One,” *The Simpsons*, season six, episode 25 (Fox, May 21, 1995); “Who Shot Mr. Burns?, Part Two,” *The Simpsons*, season seven, episode one (Fox, September 17, 1995).

billionaire.⁴⁷ Burns has greedily amassed his wealth through cutthroat, often unethical, and occasionally illegal means. He is not generous, and even in the brief moments when he is convinced to be charitable, his actions almost inevitably dissolve into some benefit to himself. For example, in one episode Burns goes bankrupt, and Lisa helps him earn his fortune back through recycling. He seems to have an epiphany when she shows him how to collect cans and notes the importance of cutting up six-pack plastic rings to protect marine life. He builds a profitable recycling plant, but Lisa is horrified to discover her plastic ring lesson has inspired him to build a gigantic, devastatingly effective fishing net. As Lisa puts it, “When you’re trying to be good, you’re even more evil!”⁴⁸

Lisa is mostly correct. When Mr. Burns does a good deed it either benefit him the most, or is somehow reneged by the end of the episode. As a case in point, in “Team Homer,” Burns agrees to sponsor Homer’s bowling team only because he is under the influence of ether when Homer asks him.⁴⁹ Later, he goes to the bowling alley to rescind his sponsorship, only to decide to join the team instead. Belying his usual heartlessness, he revels in the camaraderie and friendship on the bowling team. Burns is a terrible bowler, but he manages to knock down two pins to help the team win the league trophy. Burns keeps it for himself, discarding his teammates. As Homer explains, “I guess some people never change. Or they quickly change and then quickly change back.” In summing up the episode this way, Homer is describing almost every character on *The Simpsons*, as well as most characters across television sitcom history.

⁴⁷ This plot was a parody of the famous two-part storyline on *Dallas*, “Who Shot J.R.?” another murder mystery that remained unsolved over the show’s summer hiatus. “A House Divided,” *Dallas*, season three, episode 25 (CBS, March 21, 1980); “Who Done it?,” *Dallas*, season four, episode one (CBS, November 21, 1980).

⁴⁸ “The Old Man and the Lisa,” *The Simpsons*, season eight, episode 21 (Fox, April 20, 1997).

⁴⁹ “Team Homer,” *The Simpsons*, episode 12, season seven (Fox, January 7, 1996). This episode is *The Simpsons*’s “response” to Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*, as discussed in the introduction.

While some characters on dramas, like *N.Y.P.D. Blue*'s Andy Sipowicz, do experience a substantial transformation, sitcom characters remained essentially static until sitcom storylines became more serialized in the 2000s. Regardless of the lessons learned the previous week, each new sitcom episode resets its characters' circumstances and personalities. *The Simpsons*, with its typical self-consciousness, referenced the static nature of the sitcom form with quotes like Homer's above. In this way, *The Simpsons* de-emphasized the urgency of the late 20th century crisis of the self so apparent in the self-obsessed agonizing of *Seinfeld*'s characters. Springfield's citizens did not need to worry so much about the flaws of themselves and their neighbors; even an immoral character like Burns fit into Springfield's ultimately healthy social fabric.

So Burns, evil though not *pure* evil, has a valuable role in the community. As already discussed, the nuclear plant he owns and operates is a significant source of employment to the town and *the* source of income for the Simpsons. One of only a very few competent businessmen in town, he is an entrepreneur who has kept his money and business local. In one episode, Burns sells the plant to German investors and initially the change in ownership seems like a good thing. The new owners are kinder to the employees, and they only fire one employee—the incompetent safety inspector, Homer Simpson. Gradually, the investors realize the power plant is so dilapidated, the repairs would cost more than they paid to buy it. Mr. Burns, seeking to mend his broken ego after he discovers his former employees are no longer afraid of him, happily buys it back at half the cost he sold it for. And Homer gets his job back.⁵⁰ Though the German ownership might look more appealing, and though the Germans might have had generally good intentions, it is better to have Burns running the plant in its run-down condition. As the Germans

⁵⁰ "Burns Verkaufen der Kraftwerk," *The Simpsons*, episode 11, season three (Fox, December 5, 1991). The title is German for "Burns Sells the Power Plant."

discovered, anyone with more decency might have shut the plant down in the interests of the employees. Burns's heartless power is an important piece of Springfield's status quo.

Burns's power is far from all-reaching. Once the whistle blows in the opening sequence, Homer is freed from his job.⁵¹ Burns seems rather baffled at this moment; he shakes his watch and holds it to his ear, wondering if it really could be quitting time already. Homer does not hesitate. Without retreating to a different room, he pops off his hazmat helmet and turns to leave. In his haste, the glowing green rod he was working with bounces up and lodges in his shirt. The gag emphasizes Homer's clumsiness but neither his nor the town's health will suffer for it. Homer happily leaves corporate power and nuclear power behind as he begins his own journey home to his nuclear family.⁵²

Marge and Maggie at the Market

At the grocery store, Marge is checking out, spending the money her husband has earned. She reads a magazine, "Mom Monthly," as the groceries ride down the checkout belt—beer...doughnuts...various recognizably-shaped consumables...and Maggie?!⁵³ The unseen attendant scans Maggie on the barcode reader and drops her in a brown paper bag. The ensuing BEEP startles Marge, and she briefly looks around concernedly for her baby daughter. Maggie pops out of one of the grocery bags in the shopping cart looking typically stoic, her trademark

⁵¹ This moment resembles the beginning of the opening sequence for *The Flintstones* (ABC, 1960-66), the most successful animated primetime series before *The Simpsons*. A whistle liberates Fred Flintstone, the patriarch of the modern Stone Age family, from work. He races home to pick up his family and then his friends for a night out at a drive-in movie theatre.

⁵² Paul A. Cantor, author of "The Simpsons: Atomistic Politics and the Nuclear Family," is one of many writers who have played on this connection between the nuclear family-centric *Simpsons* and its protagonist's job in a nuclear power plant.

⁵³ Maggie might be the most famous baby in sitcom history. She is certainly the most well-developed baby character. Yet another advantage of the show being animated was that the creators and writers could have a baby do whatever they wanted it to do in any kind of situation.

pacifier still in her mouth. Relieved, Marge begins to push the cart with Maggie and bags of groceries out of the store.

Marge does not hesitate, but should she be concerned that she has just been charged for her own child? Maggie, a third child, *is* a cost for the ostensibly cash-strapped Simpsons.⁵⁴ As the story of her birth told in “And Maggie Makes Three” reveals, she was an unintended pregnancy. Judging by Homer’s hair-pulling reactions to all three pregnancies, though, so were Bart and Lisa. At the time, Homer had managed to squeeze the family budget enough to quit his job at the power plant and take a job at Bowlarama, his favorite bowling alley. “If horse racing is the sport of kings, than surely bowling is...a very good sport as well!” Homer reminisces happily, describing the first time in his life when he worked a job he loved. Maggie’s birth ultimately forced him back to his dreaded job at the power plant, where Mr. Burns welcomes him with a “de-motivational plaque to break what’s left of your spirit.” Hung right above his workstation, the plaque reminds him, “Don’t forget: you’re here forever.” In a rare moment of creative usurpation, Homer pastes photos of Maggie onto the plaque, covering up letters and portions of letters so that it reads, “Do it for her.”⁵⁵ “Love” thus joins “the clock” as another limitation of Burns’s power over his employees.

Marge, too, apparently does not mind paying for Maggie at the store. Silent Maggie contributes nothing to the family. Indeed, she will *never* contribute anything to the family

⁵⁴ The first episode of the series, “Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire,” *The Simpsons*, season one, episode one (Fox, December 17, 1989), depicts Homer going to desperate, ultimately futile lengths to find money to spend on Christmas presents. The only thing he brings home is a greyhound rejected from the dog track, Santa’s Little Helper, with whom the family promptly falls in love. Thereafter, various seemingly costly adventures often contradicted the Simpsons’ supposed money troubles. In the logic of *The Simpsons* universe, this contradiction is accepted, and occasionally mocked by the show itself.

⁵⁵ “And Maggie Makes Three.”

because, stuck as a baby, she will never grow old enough to get a job or even help with chores.⁵⁶ Maggie sucks. Literally, she drains resources as she sucks on her pacifier. Then again, she is rarely shown eating, and the ever-present red pacifier blocks the necessary orifice for that activity. She also rarely cries, rarely poops, and rarely does much of anything except sit around looking cute in a Simpson-y kind of way.

In an oft-repeated joke, Homer routinely forgets Maggie exists. Even though “And Maggie Makes Three” ultimately suggests Homer has a special bond with his youngest daughter, midway through the episode he almost sits on her before Bart and Lisa snatch her away at the last second. Homer’s negligence in the moment is more in keeping with absentmindedness. He holds an affection for each of his children, and his love is reciprocated in quiet Maggie’s heart. In “Lisa’s First Word,” an episode that, like “And Maggie Makes Three,” consists mainly of Homer and Marge narrating flashbacks of family history to Bart and Lisa, Maggie finally does speak her first word. Bart’s first word was “Homer,” underlining his lack of respect for his father even at a young age. Lisa’s was “Bart,” demonstrating the innate sibling affection the two otherwise contradictory characters have for each other. In the final scene of the episode, alone in her crib in her dark room after her father has kissed her goodnight, Maggie says, “Daddy.”⁵⁷

Still, Maggie is ultimately an accessory for her mother, defining Marge as a happy homemaker, as demonstrated in the opening. Other than the momentary distraction caused perhaps by the tasty-looking cake on the cover of *Mom Monthly*, Maggie remains safely at Marge’s side throughout the sequence. Indeed, while Marge often manages to move around

⁵⁶ A few flash-forwards depict her as a teen or an adult, but, regardless of how accurate those moments might be, that future is never reached in the show.

⁵⁷ Famously, Elizabeth Taylor voiced Maggie’s first word. “Lisa’s First Word,” *The Simpsons*, season four, episode 10 (Fox, December 3, 1992).

Springfield without her baby, whenever Maggie appears on the show, she is almost always near her mother.

Marge is ostensibly a traditional housewife archetype. While Homer finishes up at the plant, his wife is performing her expected role, doing the shopping and taking care of Maggie. Flipping through “Mom Monthly,” she is also carrying out her presumed duties as a female consumer in America’s capitalist economy; she is reading articles and ads, both suggesting things she can do or buy to be a better mom. Unlike her husband, she is a conscientious consumer who budgets carefully and spends thoughtfully. While “And Maggie Makes Three” describes how Homer and Marge struggle to live on a tight budget, the story also shows Marge preparing for her next trip to the store. As the episode reaches its final commercial break, the show uses the moment for a hyper-conscious joke typical of its postmodern humor. Bart interrupts the story and announces, “You can’t expect a person to sit for 30 minutes straight. I’m gonna get a snack and maybe go to the bathroom.” Marge, however, is more advertiser friendly; while Bart is shirking his presumed duties as viewer/spender in the television economy, Marge determinedly sticks to her role. “I’ll stay here, but I’m gonna think about products I might like to purchase.” She closes her eyes and imagines something like the ads the audience is about to watch, murmuring, “Mmm! Oooh! I don’t have that!” This scene as well as the opening sequence depicts Marge as an archetypically traditional woman fulfilling the labor expected of adult females in American society.

However, Marge frequently breaks free of the bonds of domesticity, and Homer usually supports her when she pursues a career that takes her away from her housework. In different

episodes, she has been a police officer, real estate agent, and a pretzel truck proprietor.⁵⁸ In “Marge Gets a Job,” a crumbling foundation tips the Simpson house on a Pisa-like slant and pushes Marge into the workforce.⁵⁹ To help pay for the needed repairs, she applies for a job in Homer’s sector at the power plant. Lisa helps her spruce up her résumé, which initially has only one line: “Homemaker, 1980-present.” Besides the money, Marge is looking forward to adding something new to her life. “My life is pretty boring,” she admits. “Last week some Jehovah’s Witnesses came to the door and I wouldn’t let them leave! They snuck away when I went into the kitchen to get more lemonade.” Marge does get the gig, but unlike episodes in later seasons when she finds a variety of jobs that she excels at, the position is far beyond her skills, contrary to Lisa’s exaggerations on her résumé. Nevertheless, she does attract Mr. Burns’s attention. Her image on his video surveillance charms him, and he listens to her suggestions to improve employee morale. Her idea to replace the break-room doughnuts with healthier snacks displeases Homer, but he is more frustrated when she gets promoted to a higher salary than he earns. His ego is wounded, but mainly because of his selfish desire to keep his home life and work life separate. Ultimately and typically, Homer is redeemed at the conclusion when he risks his own job to stick up for Marge against Mr. Burns’s sexual harassment.

Marge does not exhibit much power or independence in this episode. She does not overcome the challenges of her job, nor does she strongly rebuff Mr. Burns. Homer’s love comes to her rescue, though in the end she does not keep the job. In some earlier episodes and certainly later seasons, Marge would have dealt with the episode’s complications with much more

⁵⁸ “The Springfield Connection,” *The Simpsons*, season six, episode 23 (Fox, May 7, 1995); “Reality Bites,” *The Simpsons*, season nine, episode nine (Fox, December 7, 1997); “The Twisted World of Marge Simpson,” *The Simpsons*, season eight, episode 11 (Fox, January 19, 1997).

⁵⁹ “Marge Gets a Job,” *The Simpsons*, season four, episode seven (Fox, November 5, 1992).

independent tenacity.⁶⁰ In a similar way as the rest of her family, Marge's growth and complication as a character has occurred over the many years the series has been on the air. The more episodes that must get made, the more chances writers have to explore new interests and opportunity for Marge.

What, then, is the final sum of Marge's identity as a nineties woman? Is she ultimately and merely a homemaker, as she describes herself? Is she the "Best Mom on TV," as *Entertainment Weekly* named her in 1994?⁶¹ Or is she a "liminal lady," as scholar Matthew Henry suggests, a symbol of both the progress and shortcomings of the feminist movement and the resulting ambiguities of the role of the female at the end of the century?⁶² Henry would agree with *Entertainment Weekly*'s description of Marge as "at once progressive and traditional. A stay-at-home parent, Marge... is also worldly and independent."⁶³ However, Henry finds this dual nature indicative of a problematic ambivalence about female life. While Marge, when she takes on a variety of occupations and challenges, is often both more wise and able than the men in Springfield, Henry argues her traditional house wife underpinnings make her a contradictory symbol of womanhood.

Henry is too cynical. Within the infinite time afforded by the show, Marge is gradually exploring every possible interest that occurs to her. The patriarchal society is barely a hiccup for any of her forays, mocked by the show as Marge easily brushes off the latent chauvinism she

⁶⁰ Matthew A. Henry points out that Marge's development into a stronger woman who both excels in her role as mother and finds the time and energy to pursue other interests corresponded with a gradual rise in the number of female writers on *The Simpsons*. Matthew A. Henry, *The Simpsons, Satire, and American Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 104. As Henry notes, Jennifer Crittenden's mark of five credited scripts was more than any other female writer could claim until 2003-04. Crittenden's first script was the aforementioned "And Maggie Makes Three." She went on to write for *Seinfeld*.

⁶¹ Ken Tucker, "Yea, Mamas," *Entertainment Weekly*, May 13, 1994, 68-69.

⁶² Henry, 90. Henry borrows the concept of the "liminal" female television character from Lori Landay, *I Love Lucy in Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: the Female Trickster in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

⁶³ Tucker, 68.

often encounters. For mortal women, time is forever a greater barrier than male domination. Given eternity, Marge's personhood is ever-expanding through her experiences. Brilliant Lisa's future is limitless, but so is tenacious Marge's present. And while Homer bumbles into fresh adventures, Marge more thoughtfully pursues them. Certainly, her roles as mother and wife anchor her to home and family. But as her many exploits have demonstrated, Marge has few concerns for any gendered expectations. In the supermarket scene her relief over Maggie's reappearance is not one of a woman who has successfully carried out her socially prescribed duties. Rather, first and foremost, love drives her emotions and behavior. Once her family is taken care of, Marge finds ample freedom to explore her world.

Lisa in the Band Room

Release defines the son's and father's departures, and relief the mother's. Yet it is rejection that spurs the Simpson daughter's trip home. Lisa's intellect makes her somewhat of an outsider among her family. Even so, she is always welcome at home, never cast out as she is from school here in the introduction.

The opening sequence cuts to the Springfield Elementary band room where the music teacher, Dewey Largo, is presiding over a group of happy young musicians. Each child carefully watches Mr. Largo's conducting. All except Lisa, who, eyes closed as she blows into her saxophone, loses herself in the music. To Mr. Largo's disgust, she improvises far beyond the dictates of the sheet music. He gestures angrily, first at Lisa then towards the door. The rest of the band stops playing, stunned, but Lisa rolls on, still wailing as she swings out the door.

As an introduction to her character, Lisa's dramatic expulsion from the band room is somewhat misleading. She adores school and gets along well with all of the teachers and staff,

including the often downtrodden Principal Skinner.⁶⁴ Mr. Largo, however, is the one teacher with whom she regularly clashes. His name suggests the slow, dignified kind of music he prefers, in direct contrast to Lisa's love of exuberant, expressionistic jazz. Neither Charlie Parker nor Lisa's now-deceased saxophone mentor, "Bleeding Gums" Murphy, would be welcome in Mr. Largo's classroom. Even though he himself was a musical prodigy, the bust of Beethoven looks on Lisa's performance with a frown from a shelf on the wall of the classroom.

Though the two siblings are ostensibly foils, Lisa's ouster from the band room is similar to Bart's release from detention. Two heroes of history watch their departure, George Washington and Beethoven. Both children have gotten in trouble at school for an act of rebellion. Both leave school with a grand display of their artistic gift and preferred form of expression, skateboard and saxophone. In *The Simpsons*, the two are heroes because they both challenge authority. Bart does so with youthful innocence, Lisa with considered wisdom. Bart's behavior is more destructive; Lisa's is usually constructive. Both approaches are a needed and often celebrated element of life in Springfield.

Lisa is the intellectual of the Simpson family, possibly the greatest intellectual hero ever portrayed on primetime television. However, she is portrayed in the opening sequence in a moment of emotional abandon.⁶⁵ Indeed, since the very first episode to feature Lisa as its story's central character, her sax has been her tool of self-expression and her emotional vent. In that

⁶⁴ A good illustration of the Skinner-Lisa dynamic: Skinner is standing on the auditorium stage addressing the student body. "I need a volunteer for a thankless chore." He squints into the auditorium lights, realizing he cannot see anything. "Shall I assume the only hand in the air is Lisa Simpson's? Thank you Lisa." From "Lard of the Dance," *The Simpsons*, season ten, episode one (Fox, August 23, 1998).

⁶⁵ The original, season one version of the opening sequence more clearly presented Lisa's academic pursuits. Just before the family converges on their home, there is a shot of Lisa riding her bike with a huge pile of school books balanced in the bike's handlebar basket. She hits a bump and the books fly up in the air, only to land safely back in the basket with no harm done. The whip-pan across a collection of Springfield characters replaced this moment in subsequent seasons, while Lisa's love for school was repeatedly demonstrated throughout the series as a defining characteristic.

episode, Lisa first meets “Bleeding Gums” Murphy, a worn-down, black saxophonist who teaches her the therapeutic benefits of piping her sorrow through her instrument.⁶⁶ The educational system in Springfield follows the national trends in deprioritizing the arts.⁶⁷ When Mr. Burns’s maneuverings put the school into debt, Principle Skinner announces cuts to “nonessential programs, music, and maintenance.”⁶⁸ Springfield Elementary celebrates Lisa’s mental output but discourages her artistic, emotional output. In the ideology of the show, that is one of the institution’s central flaws which Lisa constantly fights to overcome. Lisa’s strength comes from her unique (in Springfield) balance of mental genius and emotional health. That balance rests upon Lisa’s common sense, a rare and thus often useful quality in Springfield.

Around town, Lisa is a frequent challenger to the inertia of the status quo, pushing the often hapless town to do better. Her reform style resembles her saxophone playing; Lisa is often a soloist, such as when she embraces and subsequently tries to promote vegetarianism.⁶⁹ She also regularly works for change in partnership with her brother, mother, or father. Homer is her biggest proponent in “Lisa the Iconoclast,” an episode that exemplifies Lisa’s tenacity as well as her willingness to compromise her moral beliefs and emotional needs in the interests of the community.⁷⁰ As Springfield’s bicentennial celebration approaches, Lisa discovers evidence that the town’s glorified founder, Jebidiah Springfield, was actually a murderous pirate, Hans Sprungfeld, a terrible man undeserving of the town’s reverence. When town pride repeatedly

⁶⁶ “Moaning Lisa,” *The Simpsons*, season one, episode six (Fox, February 11, 1990). Murphy died and left his saxophone to Lisa in “Round Springfield,” *The Simpsons*, season six, episode 26 (Fox, April 30, 1995).

⁶⁷ In 1993 *The New York Times* reported the amount of class time devoted to arts had steadily declined since 1962. In the quarter century since that story, that trend has not reversed. Susan Chira, “As Schools Trim Budgets, The Arts Lose Their Place,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 1993.

⁶⁸ “Who Shot Mr. Burns?, Part 1.” In “The President Wore Pearls,” *The Simpsons*, season 15, episode three (Fox, November 16, 2003), Lisa leads a student strike when the school cuts athletics, arts, and music.

⁶⁹ “Lisa the Vegetarian,” *The Simpsons*, season seven, episode five (Fox, October 15, 1995).

⁷⁰ “Lisa the Iconoclast,” *The Simpsons*, season seven, episode sixteen (Fox, February 18, 1996).

thwarts her attempts to demolish the collective memory of the town's founder, Lisa eventually tracks down indisputable proof of Springfield's dark past. She interrupts the celebration to share her findings with everyone, but at the last moment she keeps the truth to herself. "The myth of Jebediah has value too," she explains to the town's historian. "It's brought out the best in everyone in this town."⁷¹ Though her ethical code calls for the unmasking of the founder and her ego craves the opportunity to prove she was right all along, Lisa's instincts alert her that self-censorship is in the best interests of the community. Lisa loves the town, and when she is forced to decide, both logic and emotion trump ethics and ego. It is love, thoughtful and emotional love, which prevents her from a prideful demonstration that she was right all along. Love suppresses Lisa's individual achievements in the best interests of her neighbors. She keeps the truth to herself, and joins in the parade, riding on the shoulders of her loving father. Because of her precocious gifts, Lisa the soloist is often a lonely figure in *The Simpsons*, but she never ends up alone.

Simpsons on the Road

As the Simpsons return home from school, work, and market, they zip around the streets of Springfield. Like most middle class Americans in the post-World War II age of automobile-spurred suburbanization, they barely interact with the town as they pass through it.

Homer drives down the streets alone, a smile on his face as he leaves the taller buildings behind on approach to Springfield's suburbs. He has brought some of his work with him. A look of discomfort hits his face, and he reaches back into his shirt to pull out the glowing green

⁷¹ Lisa continues, quoting the town's motto supposedly uttered by Jebediah Springfield, "A noble spirit embiggens the smallest man." The episode is famous for coining the made-up words "embiggen" and "cromulent." For an excellent review of the episode that further explores the question of why Lisa holds back the truth, see Erik Adams, "*The Simpsons* Classic: 'Lisa the Iconoclast'—Perfectly Cromulent," A.V. Club, May 11, 2014, accessed May 22, 2015, <http://www.avclub.com/tvclub/simpsons-classic-lisa-iconoclast-204480>.

radioactive rod that lodged there when he left work. Rolling down his window, he tosses the waste out into the street. At the same moment, he reaches a turn in the road. His tires leave a puff of smoke as they squeal around the bend, suggesting another form of pollution. However, as the quarter century of evidence indicates, the pollution Homer leaves behind has no effect on life in Springfield. The significance of his action is not that he has added pollution to the town, but that he has removed the final pollution of work from his body, finishing the undressing process begun when the whistle blew at work. The green bar is the last remnant of Homer's work "uniform" that he takes off before he assumes his primary role as a mostly contented suburban man, husband, and father.

The bouncing rod leads the camera to Bart, who continues his own four-wheeled exploits. He whips around a streetlight pole, taking the corner more impressively than his father did a moment before. He proceeds to weave heedlessly but successfully around pedestrians on the sidewalk. Finally, he darts past Springfield's Police Chief Wiggum, who, typically ineffective, can only shout as Bart zooms across a street and out of the frame. Even the camera, it seems, is finally exhausted from the chase.

Bart's explosive emergence from the school was the original catalyst for the opening sequence's dynamism. Now his display on Springfield's sidewalk marks the pinnacle of movement and action. The scene breaks up the two relatively static shots of his parents driving in their cars, building the sequence's momentum as the family hurtles towards home and one another. Bart begins and pushes the pace and energy of the sequence. Indeed, he was the early star of the show. Even so, the sequence is designed to balance the screen time given to introduce each of the Simpsons. Bart's youthful, reckless energy is the original spirit of the show, but the family as a unit is its foundation. Each family member is moving swiftly home, and they are each

doing so with a smile. How dysfunctional could the Simpsons be if their greatest routine joy is their collective, instinctual migration to their home?

Bart causes annoyance, though not too much trouble on the sidewalk as he zips past several of the show's recurring characters, recognizable to regular viewers. Here the sequence begins to reveal the many personalities that make up Springfield's community. Having already depicted school, work, and commerce, the introduction now presents characters representing several other important places and institutions in the town's life. Bart passes embodiments of:

- *Religion*—Helen Lovejoy, the wife of the minister at the Simpsons's church, is carrying shopping bags from the Springfield Mall.
- *Small Business/Non-White/Immigrant*—Apu Nahasapeemahpetilon, the Indian proprietor of the Kwik-E-Mart convenience store, is walking a small dog.
- *Small Business/Alcohol*—Moe Szyslak is leaning in front of his own Moe's Tavern, Homer's favorite bar. He is standing next to his best customer, alcoholic Barney Gumble, who lets out a belch as Bart passes by.
- *Leisure*—Bowling instructor Jacques is carrying a bowling ball and looking dreary. He is, after Mr. Burns, the next closest thing to a villain to appear in the opening sequence. In a season one episode, he tries and fails to woo Marge into an affair.⁷²
- *Celebrity*—Krusty the Clown, Bart's hero, appears not in person but via a display of televisions in a storefront. The rambunctious, trouble-making children's entertainer, who remains in his clown makeup no matter the situation, is the only adult to whom Bart pays the complement of his attention as he hurtles past.

⁷² "Life on the Fast Lane," *The Simpsons*, season one, episode nine (Fox, March 18, 1990).

- *Art/Non-White*—Lisa’s musical mentor, the aforementioned “Bleeding Gums” Murphy stands lazily on the sidewalk. The rather bohemian jazz man is the only character with neither a place to go nor any apparent reason for being there on the sidewalk at that moment.
- *Law/Authority*—Police Chief Clancy Wiggum waves his nightstick but otherwise does nothing to halt Bart’s progress. He also does not seem to notice Marge, in the next instant, blowing through a stop sign. His back is to the sign, further underscoring his typical cluelessness.

With some effort, it would be possible to trace some thematic overlap between each character in succession, but the scene is more notable for its heterogeneity. Eight very different people appear all at once, within a few paces of each other. Such is the richness of the community of Springfield. There is some inherent stereotyping in many of the characterizations in *The Simpsons*—the Indian convenience store owner, the black jazz musician, the French womanizer—though, once the show takes the time to explore deeply the stories of their lives, even the recurring characters on *The Simpsons* are not as simplistic as they first appear. Most of these characters have been featured in one or more episodes. In the original opening sequence, Bart skateboarded past anonymous characters, but after the first season the scene was changed to include only familiar faces. With each passing season, viewers would be able to ascribe increasingly deep backstories to these characters. Springfield is safe and comfortable enough that Bart and Lisa, fourth and third graders respectively, make an apparently lengthy commute home from school all by themselves.⁷³ The Simpsons are not passing through anonymous streets.

⁷³ Intellectually, emotionally, and behaviorally, Bart and Lisa often act slightly older than ten and nine, their supposed ages on the show. Bart’s age somewhat excuses his mischievousness, as Lisa’s age emphasizes her precociousness. But the kids’ maturity has been necessarily stretched as their adventures have led them to deal with

Still, in the opening sequence, they *are* passing through. Homer does not stop at Moe's for a beer. Bart does not stop at Apu's Kwik-E-Mart for a Squishee, Springfield's imagined version of a slushie. Their commute resembles a key behavioral change wrought by America's 20th century suburbanization; no longer were the centers of American cities and towns also the center of community life. According to the opening sequence, life in *The Simpsons* is geographically centered at the single-family suburban home. On the other hand, the Simpsons do not circumvent downtown via highways, as most commuters did in America's cities in the second half of the 20th century.⁷⁴ Just because the Simpsons prioritize their home as home base, does not mean they rarely venture into the town, alone or frequently together. Ultimately, then, the familiar faces on the urban street belie the suburban isolation the commute suggests. Homer will be drinking a beer with Barney at Moe's soon. Bart will be fighting a Squishee brain freeze at the Kwik-E-Mart soon. Town life is not a central part of the Simpsons's lives, but it is a regular part.

After Marge and Maggie drive past Chief Wiggum, the camera cuts to the interior of their station wagon and finds Maggie behind the steering wheel. Even the Simpsons baby is safe on the streets of Springfield! A wider camera angle reveals she is merely using a toy steering wheel to mimic her mother's driving. Maggie, the Mini-Marge, is practicing to grow up just like her mother. Her daughter's mimicry pleases her, and Marge, still copied by Maggie, taps the steering

everything from pre-teen romance to civic problems. Such dissonance is not uncommon for cartoons, and *Simpsons*, it helps emphasize a satirical point when, for example, a nine-year-old girl is the wisest person in

⁷⁴ References to highways have been few and far between over the course of the series. In "Sideshow Bob Roberts," *The Simpsons*, episode five, season six (Fox, October 9, 1994), Mayor Quimby renames a proposed freeway "The Matlock Expressway" to garner support from the town's seniors for highway connecting downtown to the suburbs. Outside of town, a sign reading, "Another Government Highway Project That Will Never End," suggests a highway may replace Rural Route 9 in "Rednecks and Broomsticks," *The Simpsons*, season 21, episode seven (Fox, November 29, 2009). The Simpsons occasionally drive on highways in and out of Springfield, but traffic in Springfield seems to operate mostly on surface-level streets, in this way harkening back to 1950s American life.

wheel with a smile before the scene cuts away. The sequence never reveals the object of Marge's honk. Perhaps she is celebrating their final approach home.

Springfield, the Rest of It

Before the Simpsons get there, the opening takes a moment—literally only a second—to flash past a slew of recurring characters engaged in various activities in the neighborhood around the Simpsons home. It is a rapid panning shot, arching from left to right. The landscape is curved, suggesting, in a highly stylized fashion, the curvature of the earth, but also making the visual impact of the whip-pan less jarring. This panorama is extremely quick, too fast for any viewer to pick out every face in the pre-digital age in which the sequence was first created. This shot was not in the season one sequence, so why did the creators decide to add it? The scene firmly establishes what Bart's sidewalk skateboard first suggested; *The Simpsons* is primarily about the family, but the family's life and world can only be understood in the context of their town. And no other feature defines Springfield as much as its inhabitants. The rapidity of the scene helps emphasize how many familiar faces there are in town—so many, that the camera does not have time to linger on any of them.

Upon close examination there is a lot going on in this brief scene. There are always interesting happenings in Springfield, so again, the camera does not need to explore any of these events more closely. The people of the town will create another adventure soon enough. Because the events are unconnected from any past or future narrative, the best way to describe the scene is also the most efficient way, moving from left to right:

- Milhouse, Bart’s best friend, is playing catch with two other familiar boys in Bart’s grade.⁷⁵
- Nelson, the bully in Bart’s grade, is directing his two lackeys to hold a child upside down in a garbage can.⁷⁶
- Two older bullies, Kearney and Jimbo, are threatening Martin, a bookish boy in Bart’s grade
- In the next yard over, on the other side of a hedge, the elderly Winfields sit on rocking chairs in the lawn, observing the goings on.⁷⁷
- In the same yard, Marge’s sisters, Patty and Selma Bouvier, are sunbathing with cone-shaped bikinis.
- Twins Sherri and Terri, Lisa’s classmates, are walking in the yard hand-in-hand, doing nothing remarkable except looking slightly creepy, as identical twins often do.
- On the street in the foreground, the town’s most famous news anchor, Kent Brockman, reports live on the scene. But on the scene of what? He is standing in front of the yard filled with kids, but there are other slightly more newsworthy events going on around him...
- The next yard over is the Springfield Retirement Castle, home of Grandpa Abe Simpson, Homer’s father. He is leering open-mouthed at the scantily-clad Bouvier sisters, along with his friend Jasper and Herman Hermann, the brusque, one-armed proprietor of

⁷⁵ The boys are named Lewis and Richard. I do not know whether they were named in homage to comedian, Richard Lewis, but I suspect it is a coincidence.

⁷⁶ Nelson’s thugs are known as The Weasels.

⁷⁷ The Winfields lived next door to the Simpsons until, fed up with their neighbors, they moved to Florida in “New Kid on the Block,” *The Simpsons*, season four, episode eight (Fox, November 12, 1992). In the geographic stylization of the opening sequence, they do not seem to be sitting in a yard next door to the Simpson house. Perhaps in their senility they set up in front of the wrong house.

Herman's Military Antiques. Herman is too young to live at the senior residence, so perhaps he is just there for the spectacle.

- Two police officers, Lou and Eddie, are standing behind a barricade in the street, watching Kent Brockman's report.
- Dr. Marvin Monroe and Dr. Julius Hibbert, the Simpsons's psychiatrist and physician, respectively, are comparing notes on their clipboards.⁷⁸
- Behind the doctors, Otto the bus driver leans on his broken down school bus. Its front wheel is missing. All of the kids seem to be out of the bus save for fragile Wendell, Bart's classmate, who is leaning out a rear window looking ill.
- Finally, the Flanders family stands in their front yard. Ned and his son Todd hold a bluebird, while another bluebird flies towards Ned's wife's outstretched hand. The birds seem to symbolize the Christian family's devoutness.

Just like the sidewalk scene earlier, this is a varied group of characters with no obvious connection to one another, save for their shared hometown. The range of actions and reactions depicted demonstrates the landscape of the behavior that can be found in Springfield. There are good people (The Flanders) and not so good people (the bullies). There are familiar caricatures (Kent Brockman) and familiarly strange caricatures (the Bouvier sisters), all living together in the brief panorama of Springfield

The interwoven nature of life in Springfield stands in stark contrast to the detached community in *Seinfeld's* New York. Both shows contain caricatures of types of people found in real life. *Seinfeld's* characters are inevitably annoyed by the various behavioral tics of the people

⁷⁸ Dr. Monroe was long presumed deceased, both within the show and among its fans. The strong evidence that he was dead included several buildings named in his memory as well as a tombstone. However, he showed up in a 2004 episode, explaining simply that he had been sick. "Diatribes of a Mad Housewife," *The Simpsons*, season 15, episode ten, (Fox, January 25, 2004).

they encounter. *The Simpsons*, on the other hand, celebrates the full spectrum of human weirdness. *Seinfeld*'s characters would avoid Springfield's wacky citizens if at all possible. The characters in *The Simpsons* may initially regard a new arrival in town with curiosity, but there is ultimately little resistance in Springfield to human difference. Indeed, as the opening sequence reveals, Springfield's defining characteristic is that it easily accommodates all imaginable types of people.⁷⁹

Like its people, Springfield is not perfect. Here, as throughout the opening sequence, there are signs of garbage negligently left on the ground in the same spirit Homer reveals when he tosses his green rod out his car window. On the sidewalk in town and on the street in the neighborhood the cartoonists have taken the time to draw little bottles and bits of garbage, one of the very few details added to the drawings. Far from dominating the visual scene, the garbage sits there as evidence of the town's rougher edges. Ultimately, though, nature is thriving. There is green in every outdoor scene in the sequence, even in the more urban scenes, and especially in the fleeting landscape panorama. The blue sky is similarly ever-present, and its uniform shade makes its presence even stronger than the shades of green in the landscape. There are a few clouds to be seen, but not enough to disrupt the typical mood of contentment on another sunny afternoon in Springfield.

Homer's Home

Throughout it all, Danny Elfman's joyful theme song draws the happy Simpsons ever-closer to home. Finally, Homer pulls into the Simpsons's driveway. There is a visible oil stain on the driveway, and the open garage door reveals a cluttered space. The Simpson house, like

⁷⁹ The fictional town of Cicely, Alaska in *Northern Exposure* (CBS, 1990-95) is similarly and perhaps even more welcoming than Springfield.

Springfield, is also not perfect. But the house on 742 Evergreen Terrace is perfect for the Simpsons.⁸⁰ As the street name suggests, it is always there for them, just as the family is always on television, never aging, forever green.

Until now, Bart's skateboarding has driven the energy of the sequence. In the end, Homer is the focal point of the Simpsons' arrival home. Similarly, in the show's history, Bart was the most famous character in its first years, but ultimately Homer became its most celebrated character, as well as its emotional heart.⁸¹ He is the embodiment of both the family and the town. Selfish and stupid, Homer is the most dysfunctional character, but he is also the most frequently redeemed at the conclusion of episodes, finally course-correcting his hapless misbehavior when, often with some help from his family, he realizes he is harming the people he loves.

Homer's stupidity is, essentially, a lack of awareness of the consequences of his actions. Fortunately, his family, particularly Marge, are always on hand to point those consequences out to him. *N.Y.P.D. Blue*'s Andy Sipowicz similarly relies on his workplace family to help him understand the consequences of his bigotries so that he may become a better person. Unlike Sipowicz, Homer's character never grows, but his stupidity is never as damaging as Sipowicz's racism or alcoholism. And unlike the characters in his namesake's poems, Homer is not a hero in any traditional sense.⁸² He is merely a decent guy who has stumbled into an exceptional life because, for better and often for worse, he is ruled by the desires of his heart.

⁸⁰ The series has been inconsistent in its portrayal of the exact house address, but 742 is the most commonly used and accepted address for The Simpsons.

⁸¹ In 2010, *Entertainment Weekly*, the same barometer of American culture that named Marge TV's best mom, called Homer the greatest character of the past 20 years. The list included fictional characters from television, film, and literature. Adam B. Vary, "The 100 Greatest Characters of the Last 20 Years: Here's Our Full List," *Entertainment Weekly*, June 1, 2010, accessed May 30, 2015, <http://www.ew.com/article/2010/06/01/100-greatest-characters-of-last-20-years-full-list>.

⁸² Matt Groening named the character after his father, who was named after the Greek poet, Homer. He also took the name Homer Simpson from Nathanael West's novel, *Day of the Locust* (New York: Random House, 1939). Groening says he "thought Simpson was a funny name in that it had the word 'simp' in it, which is short for

In the real world, Homer's stupidity would have killed him a long time ago. In *The Simpsons*, his reckless, boundless approach to life leads him to wonderful adventures around the world and rich rewards in his family life. This contradiction is captured in "Homer's Enemy," when a new character, Frank "Grimey" Grimes, gets a job at the power plant and is stunned as he learns more and more about Homer's inexplicably easy life.⁸³ Grimey is Homer's exact opposite. While Homer is lazy and always looking for a short cut, Grimey has used hard work to overcome bad luck his entire life. He cannot fathom how Homer can keep his job as plant safety inspector despite the statistics that show the plant has become far less safe since Homer started working there. Homer tries to make peace, inviting Grimey home for a special lobster dinner with the family, but the plan backfires when Homer's luxurious life further boggles Grimey's worldview, sparking an incensed rant:

I've had to work hard every day of my life and what do I have to show for it? This briefcase and this haircut. And what do you have to show for your lifetime of sloth and ignorance? Everything! A dream house, two cars, a beautiful wife a son who owns a factory [purchased at auction for \$1 in the episode's other storyline], fancy clothes and lobsters for dinner! And do you deserve any of it? No! ... You're what's wrong with America, Simpson. You coast through life, you do as little as possible and you leach off decent, hard-working people, like me. If you lived in any other country in the world, you'd have starved to death long ago... You're a fraud, a total fraud.

Grimey is perhaps the only character in the show's history to deconstruct Homer's character so thoroughly. And his characterization is fair; Homer *is* lazy and dimwitted. Grimey's criticism sounds a bit like President George H.W. Bush's dismissal of the family's qualities in the show's

'simpleton.'" Claudia de la Roca, "Matt Groening Reveals the Location of the Real Springfield," *Magazine* (May 2012), accessed November 15, 2015, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/matt-groening-reveals-the-location-of-the-real-springfield-60583379/?no-ist=>.

⁸³ "Homer's Enemy," *The Simpsons*, season eight, episode 23 (Fox, May 4, 1997). This episode appears on many "Best of" lists, but, as a quick internet search reveals, also has its vehement detractors. I side with comedian Ricky Gervais, who, after he wrote an episode of *The Simpsons*, called this the best episode ever. His second favorite: "And Maggie Makes Three." Dan Snierson, "Ricky Gervais Rates 'The Simpsons,'" *Entertainment Weekly*, March 24, 2006, accessed May 30, 2015, <http://www.ew.com/article/2006/03/24/ricky-gervais-rates-simpsons>.

early years. However, unlike early nineties critics of *The Simpsons* who saw the hero-worshipping of Bart as a manifestation of America's misguided values, Grimey sees the father as the true exemplar of the nation's flaws.

Grimey could perhaps live with Homer's faults if the rest of the town shared at least some of his annoyance. Instead, Homer's friends defend him at every turn. When Grimey lists the damning safety statistics since Homer got his job as plant safety inspector, Lenny retorts, "Hey, what do you got against Homer anyway? ...Everybody makes mistakes. That's why they put erasers on pencils."

To break through this attitude, Grimey decides to humiliate and expose Homer, tricking him into entering a competition for children to design a model nuclear power plant. To Grimey's shock, Mr. Burns picks Homer's design over the children's, including an impressive model that is actually a functioning nuclear power plant in miniature. The creator of this impressive model, Lisa's brilliant classmate Martin Prince, even boasts that his construction is actually powering the lights in the auditorium. He demonstrates, dimming the lights, but Mr. Burns is unimpressed. "Too cold and sterile," declares the characteristically chilly Mr. Burns, unaware of the irony. "Where's the heart?"

Homer appears on stage. Grimey loudly mocks Homer for entering a competition for children, but the rest of the audience does not join in his condemnation. Homer's model is nothing impressive; it looks a lot like the existing nuclear plant, except he taped wind resistant paper fins to the cooling towers and painted a racing stripe down the side for style. Mr. Burns gives Homer first place and the audience endorses the selection with their applause. This, finally, Grimey cannot tolerate. He explodes with an even bigger rant, pretending to be as stupid as Homer until, mocking Homer's recklessness, Grimey grabs some high voltage cables and

electrocutes himself to death. At the funeral, Homer dozes off as Grimey's casket is lowered into the ground, interrupting Rev. Lovejoy's eulogy by blurting out, "Change the channel, Marge!" Again, rather than shun his breach of etiquette, Homer's neighbors accept his foible. "That's our Homer!" shouts Lenny. The rest of the mourners, including Rev. Lovejoy, burst out laughing as Grimey's coffin sinks into the earth.

In his only episode, Grimey is something of an alien in Springfield, a visitor from a world closer to the real one than Homer's, and his perspective allows him to realize what the audience has always known about Homer. Grimey argues, somewhat persuasively, that Homer's success shows an inherent brokenness in the American dream; success and happiness should be achievable through hard work. He thinks American life should be essentially a meritocracy, which means Homer should be fired and his wealth should be taken away. He believes that if he can reveal the inherent contradictions in Homer's life to the rest of the town, the system will self-correct for the mistake that has allowed Homer to thrive. Either Homer's co-workers (the laboring class) will get him fired in their own interest or Homer's boss (the capitalist) will remove a cause of inefficiency. What Grimey fails to appreciate is that Homer's friends *do* know Homer. They have long since collectively decided to accept Homer's flaws. Grimey pushes for Homer's condemnation, but with Grimey dead, the people of Springfield are the ones who get the last word on the matter, and they confirm their acceptance: "That's our Homer." Who is right? Is Grimey calling attention to Springfield's problematic, unquestioning acceptance of Homer's faults? Is there an economic or philosophical flaw in Springfield's system that allows Homer to thrive despite himself? Or is this flaw actually a strength? Does Springfield only "work" because everyone treats each other as though their flaws do not exist?

The answers are found in the model power plant competition. Though Mr. Burns, the most hateful man in Springfield, is the judge, even he can see the merits of Homer's design that Grimey misses. Martin's model, as the young genius boasts, is the future of nuclear power, but in a world stuck in time, there is little value in investing resources towards improvement in the long-term. Martin feels the same about the current power plant as Grimey feels about Homer; both need replacement. In copying the current building, Homer's design demonstrates the same heart for the building's status quo as the town shows to him. He tacks on a little bit of aesthetic flair to the building, just as he himself tried to win over Grimey earlier in the episode by acting marginally more professional without actually changing anything about himself. The improvements are merely cosmetic. Neither Homer nor the power plant will ever change. The people of Springfield are just fine with both propositions. In a town filled with generally happy people, what could be better than the status quo? Springfield's status quo, though, is not guided by order and logic, but by dysfunction and love. The people of Springfield enjoy a utopian existence through a communal love that grants the freedom for all to be imperfect.

The most loving relationship on the show, the marriage between Homer and Marge, is also a microcosm of this lovingly accepting attitude that pervades Springfield. Marge could justifiably ask Homer to change much of his standard behavior: his drinking, his unreliability, his poor money-management. She does not. Marge is no pushover. She will request change in certain cases, but this is always done in the best interests of their partnership, not out of a desire to make Homer into a better individual—an important distinction.

For example, the season seven episode "King-Size Homer" is an excellent depiction of the healthy Simpson marriage in action.⁸⁴ The episode itself contains a typical formula for one of

⁸⁴ "King-Size Homer," *The Simpsons*, season seven, episode seven (Fox, November 5, 1995).

Homer's schemes. He realizes he can stay home from work on disability if he pushes his weight over 300 pounds, a 61-pound gain. As always, he throws himself into this plan with little consideration of the consequences. That is where Marge is there to help him. Homer reaches his goal and begins his happy life of working from home, but eventually Marge confronts him (tricking him into the conversation by having Lisa tell him a cake just came out of the oven). Marge, practicing her least nagging tone, suggests they list the pros and cons of his scheme:

MARGE: Con—You're endangering your health.

HOMER: Pro—I'm drought- and famine-resistant.

MARGE: Con—Setting a bad example for the children.

HOMER: Pro—I don't have to go to work.

MARGE: Con—You're running the air conditioner non-stop. It's freezing in here.

HOMER: Pro—I love you?

MARGE: Con—I'm finding myself less attracted to you physically.

Marge delivers the last critique honestly but delicately, knowing it will hurt Homer's feelings.

Homer recoils, angry that his loyal wife will not back him this time. In fact, he does not immediately change, stubbornly sticking to his plan. Only after his own negligence at his home-based workstation nearly causes a disaster at the nuclear plant does Homer decide to heed his wife's advice and lose the added weight, dropping back down to his usual, still-unhealthy and imperfect body.

Marge confronts Homer whenever she is particularly worried about his health, the state of their marriage, or the wellbeing of the family. Otherwise, she never asks Homer to become thinner or smarter. She often warns him that his schemes will end badly, but she never tells him to stop scheming. Marge usually lets Homer learn his lessons on his own, trusting that his innate goodness will not let the family down.

The Simpsons do not have a marriage that demands individual perfection. Springfield as a whole seems largely immune from America's self-help culture. Still, the residents of Springfield are highly susceptible to cultural trends and advertising's influence. When, for

example, a self-help guru comes to town, the entire town embraces his advice and holds a “Do What You Feel” festival.⁸⁵ Quickly, as the consequences from the citizens neglecting their usual responsibilities become apparent, the festival descends into chaos and violence. Once things settle down and the town falls back into the comforts of its status quo, the Simpsons debate the lessons they have learned. Marge suggests, “The lesson here is that self-improvement is better left to people who live in big cities.” Lisa protests, saying, “Self-improvement can be achieved, but not with a quick fix. It’s a long, arduous journey of personal and spiritual discovery.” Homer, misinterpreting Lisa’s point and inadvertently describing the entire town’s philosophy, says, “That’s what I’ve been saying. We’re all fine the way we are.”

Grimey, a man who has built his own life over a long term journey towards self-improvement, is aghast at this philosophy. Unlike “Homer’s Enemy,” as the episode title labels Grimey, Jerry’s enemy on *Seinfeld*, his neighbor, Newman, is an inextricable part of Jerry’s community, both as a neighbor in the building and as yet another selfishly-minded character on the show. Jerry may not like it, but Newman fits right into *Seinfeld*’s world. Unwilling to accept Homer’s faults with the rest of the town, Grimey completely clashes with Springfield’s philosophy, and so he is destined for destruction. But even acceptance would have only been half the distance Grimey needed to go to become a member of the Springfield community. Grimey would have needed to follow Lenny’s lead and actually love Homer Simpson; he would have had to be able to say, “That’s our Homer!” with a loving smile, not a regretful sigh. This was not in Grimey’s character, and thus, he was not able to enjoy eternal life in Springfield.

⁸⁵ “Bart’s Inner Child,” *The Simpsons*, season five, episode seven (Fox, November 11, 1993).

Simpsons Reunited

After Homer pulls into his driveway in the opening sequence, the family quickly joins him. Bart skateboards off Homer's car roof, Lisa almost collides with him on her bike, and Marge's station wagon chases him into the house. The entire family rushes into the family room to sit together on the couch.⁸⁶ Ultimately, then, *The Simpsons* fails to subvert the traditional sitcom emphasis on the domestic family as the core unit of American life. Certainly, the show complicates television's depictions of the family; the Simpsons fight with each other and struggle with each other's shortcomings in almost every episode, but they always stay together. In portraying the cartoon family's life without idealism, *The Simpsons* actually suggests an achievable ideal to its audience. And while the show maintains a subversive brand of satire, it actually delivers a sentimental, traditional-sounding message; love means sticking together, no matter what.

The same values are apparent in all of the town's residents, who demonstrate just as much loyalty to their community. New characters move to town from time to time but the old characters rarely move away. The town, like the family, is tremendously flawed, and yet the Simpsons and their neighbors love Springfield all the same. "Lisa the Iconoclast," when even Lisa sees the value of community togetherness over personal validation, is one example of many episodes that ultimately celebrate civic pride. "Homer's Enemy," when Grimey challenges Homer's essential character, is one example of many episodes that celebrates a healthy acceptance of personal flaws over the stress of personal transformation.

⁸⁶ This last scene of the sequence, known as the "couch gag," is another segment that changes from episode to episode. The couch gag is the most absurd and surreal element of the opening sequence and, frequently, the entire show. Crazy things happen when the Simpsons arrive to sit down on their couch. They might encounter doppelgangers of some form. The walls of their room might morph or dissolve into an entirely different setting. The characters themselves might appear or change into some bizarre version of themselves.

Beneath the heavy layers of satire on *The Simpsons* lays an idealistic view of America. As dysfunctional as the Simpsons family is, they consistently find happiness because they love each other. But this is not the overwrought, heavy-handed redemptive love depicted on traditional family sitcoms like *The Simpsons*' early counterpart on the TV schedule, *The Cosby Show*, and so many predecessors. On those series, each episode's problems would be solved and the family rupture would be healed with a climactic lesson, often emphasized by a swelling soundtrack.⁸⁷ The Simpsons have never learned much, and they certainly have not grown, but they have stayed together. True love, more than anything else, abides.⁸⁸ Similarly, the town sticks together too. As dystopian as Springfield is, life there is utopian compared to American society, the object of the show's ridicule. The show is irrational and often cartoonish to the point of complete absurdity, but is there anything more irrational than true love, the kind of true love that binds a family like *The Simpsons* and a town like Springfield?

The downside of *The Simpsons*' philosophy is its lack of future-mindedness. In the real world, the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant should be replaced in the public interest. However, human beings are not buildings; they cannot be torn down and rebuilt. Springfield, despite itself, is a healthy and happy community because its accepting culture is so pervasive it has thoroughly diminished the individual drive for self-transformation. America's therapeutically-minded culture can learn from *The Simpsons* that the way to stop obsessing about the flaws of the self is to learn to accept the flaws of the others.

⁸⁷ *South Park* has endlessly parodied these sitcom "lessons."

⁸⁸ "If for one moment, one single moment, it were to be absent, everything would be confused. But love does not do that, and therefore, however confused everything is for you—love abides." Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 301.

Conclusions: TV after the Nineties

“Network TV is back!” boasted Les Moonves, president and C.E.O. of CBS Television, at the end of the summer of 2000.¹

Moonves and the rest of the television industry were marveling at the ratings of CBS’s *Survivor* (2000-present). Its first season had been a stunning success, in every demographic in America. Kids watched it. Teens watched it. Adults of *all* ages watched it. Men and women watched it. Blacks, whites, and Hispanics watched it.² Americans from all income categories watched it.³

Moonves’ comment came after more than 50 million Americans watched *Survivor*’s season finale on August 23, with a 22.8 rating and a 54 share, a mark second only to that year’s Super Bowl, annually the highest rated broadcast of the television season.⁴ This was the start of the reality television boom that continues in a variety of different forms through the present.⁵ Some of the most popular reality shows are live performance contests, like *American Idol* (Fox, 2002-present) and *Dancing with the Stars* (ABC, 2005-present). Others are taped competitions between non-celebrities, like *Amazing Race* (CBS, 2001-present) and *Big Brother* (CBS, 2000-present). The latter is an antecedent of another popular form of reality show, in which cameras document every moment in the lives of one or more celebrities. Most of these shows are found

¹ Michael Schneider and Rick Kissell, “Summer Serves as Eye-Opener,” *Variety*, August 28-September 3, 2000, 19.

² Richard Huff, “Survey Says: Blacks are TV’s Biggest Fans,” *New York Daily News*, August 22, 2001, 70.

³ Rick Kissell, “‘Survivor’ Fittest in All Demos,” *Variety*, July 31-August 6, 2000.

⁴ Indeed, the Super Bowl is one annual television event that continues to increase its huge ratings score, remaining a simultaneous experience of national culture.

⁵ The summer before, ABC found a similarly unexpected hit with the quiz game show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* (ABC, 1999-2002, 2004, 2009; syndication, 2002-present). The game show did not do quite as well in the ratings as *Survivor*, probably because, as a game show, it lacked *Survivor*’s season-long narrative arc. Nor did *Millionaire* have nearly the same lasting effect on the industry as *Survivor*.

on cable networks, like *The Osbournes* (MTV, 2002-05) and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (E!, 2007-present).⁶

Competitive reality shows like *Survivor* are similar to sports in that each year's narrative arc reaches its climax at the end of a season when a champion is crowned. Even more than sports, each new season brings an entirely new set of competitors, new personalities for the audience to get to know. Because they are competing against one another, most reality show contestants do not form strong and lasting friendships while they are on their particular show.⁷ As the first season of *Survivor* established, contestants form alliances that can and do collapse at any time, whenever mutual interest evaporates. This fiction made the first season finale gripping television. While the deep and lasting familial-like bond between characters is the emotional glue that holds so many scripted television shows together for many seasons, the inevitable betrayal of temporary bonds supplies the dramatic tension on *Survivor*.

On *Survivor*, players are sent to an isolated, foreign wilderness where they must forage for survival, compete in a series of challenges, and gather each week to vote one person "off of the island."⁸ The first season of the show was dominated by an alliance of four contestants that was not broken until they were the only remaining players. This group included eventual winner, Richard Hatch, runner-up Kelly Wiglesworth, and Susan Hawk, a 38-year-old truck driver who was the first voted out when the alliance broke. In the finale, the last seven players who had been

⁶ The body of scholarship on reality television continues to expand along with the variety and nature of reality television. For a good collection of essays published soon after the genre's ascendance in popularity, see Susan Murray, and Laurie Ouellette, eds., *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

⁷ There are exceptions to these generalizations. Many reality shows bring back former contestants for "All-Star" seasons. MTV's *The Challenge* (1998-present) reshuffles former participants into different teams for each season. The editing of the show emphasizes the conflict among the cast, but there is clearly a kinship felt by many of the show's veterans, at least those who do not hate one another.

⁸ This phrase, which has become a common idiom, originated with the first season which was set on a tropical island off of Malaysia. Later iterations have not always been set on an island.

eliminated returned to form a jury which would vote to choose the champion from between Hatch and Wiglesworth. Hawk, serving on the jury, launched into a long, angry speech that became a seminal moment in the series.

She called Hatch “an arrogant, pompous human being...a loser in life,” and then turned to speak to Wiglesworth. Hawk and Wiglesworth had been friendly throughout the series until Wiglesworth had cast the decisive vote eliminating Hawk from the competition. In the finale Hawk announced she would avenge this betrayal by voting for Hatch. This would be the decisive vote, giving Hatch the \$1 million prize. But Hawk still had more to say to Wiglesworth:

If I would ever pass you along in life and you are laying there dying of thirst, I would not give you a drink of water. I would let the vultures take you and do whatever they want with you with no ill regrets. I plead to the jury tonight to think a little bit of the island we have been on. This island is full of pretty much only two things—snakes and rats. And in the end of Mother Nature [sic], we have Richard the snake, who knowingly went after prey, and Kelly, who turned into the rat that ran around like rats do on this island, trying to run from the snake. I believe we owe it to the island spirits we have come to know to let it end in the way that Mother Nature intended—for the snake to eat the rat.⁹

At first glance, *Survivor* looked like a show about a group of people who needed to work together to survive in an extreme environment. In fact, it quickly became apparent that the show rewarded conniving individuals who sought their own interest, manipulating the group to win their own cash prize. When reality is boiled down to a pure competition, a bleak vision of community emerges.

* * *

Considered by many critics and fans to be the greatest television show of all time, *The Wire* debuted on June 2, 2002 on HBO, where it ran for five seasons through 2008.¹⁰ The show

⁹ “The Final Four,” *Survivor*, season one, episode 13 (CBS, August 30, 2001).

¹⁰ *Entertainment Weekly*, for one, called it the greatest show of all time in its July 14, 2013 issue.

received low ratings and seemed in danger of cancelation every season.¹¹ And yet, some of the same technologies that have helped fragment network television's audience—DVDs, online streaming, and cable itself—kept *The Wire* around for fans to discover the series even after it concluded.

Like reality shows, much has been written and remains to be written about *The Wire*. A bleak, cynical show, it returned to the subject of urban social decay that had been largely abandoned in nineties cop shows. Set in Baltimore, it depicted a city seemingly beyond the hope of repair, despite a few well-meaning, hard-working public servants.

I mention *The Wire* not in comparison to *Survivor* but in contrast. While the show does suggest an over-arching hopelessness at the prospect of fixing problems like drugs, deindustrialization, and urban education, it nevertheless offers moments of hope and inspiration through glimpses of community repair. For example, the show dared to envision how legalizing heroine might benefit public safety and health. A convicted drug dealer's son was guided away from crime and into a better life. And a hardcore heroin addict breaks his addiction and reunites with his estranged sister. *The Wire* suggests that even while attempts to repair community issues in America may fail on the grand scale, small victories do happen, making the larger failures well worth the effort.

Community thus remains an essential theme in television into the new millennium. *Survivor* and *The Wire*, two very different shows, offered two very different visions of community, both from each other and from the shows I have discussed. More importantly, the histories of these two shows reveals the changing nature of the medium. A new genre emerged to

¹¹ At best, the series reached four million viewers, but dipped below one million in its final season, having failed to secure a consistent audience over its five seasons. By comparison, HBO's big hit, *The Sopranos*, averaged 18.2 million viewers in 2002, its best season. Robert Bianco, "Too Few Were Plugged in, but HBO's 'The Wire' Was Electric," *USA Today*, March 5, 2008.

dominate network programming. HBO led cable networks into a new level of aesthetic quality. American viewers interacted with television programming in new ways.

Continuity and Discontinuity

The ideologies of *Survivor* and *The Wire* suggest that an examination of the theme of community on TV in the 2000s would reveal very different conclusions from those of this dissertation on TV in the nineties. At the same time, there are several lines of continuity. *Seinfeld's* anti-social, self-absorbed ideology reverberates in crasser friends-as-family comedies like *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (FX, 2005-present). The underlying existential urban loneliness of *Seinfeld's* characters is even more apparent in *Louie* (FX, 2010-present).

The titular character in *Louie* lives in a New York City setting similar to *Seinfeld* where he frequently runs into friends and other quirky characters.¹² Unlike the characters in *Seinfeld*, Louie seems to lack a consistent group of friends to serve as a support group. Nor does he enjoy a comfortable place to use as an escape from his social anxieties. As Louie awkwardly and anxiously navigates life's various social interactions, his inner loneliness is even more apparent than that of Jerry or George on *Seinfeld*. One episode finds Louie alone on New Year's Eve, just after he experienced a disappointing professional setback. His ex-wife takes his beloved daughters out of town, leaving him to clean up the remnants of Christmas all alone. His sister pleads with him to join her family in Mexico for the holiday. On the bus to the airport, Louie runs into a romantic interest, his true love with whom he had lost touch earlier in the season. Their joyous reunion is cut short as the woman suddenly begins bleeding from her nose. At the

¹² Comedian Louis C.K., creator and star of *Louie*, is an old friend of Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David, peers from their earlier days as stand-up comics.

stroke of midnight, she dies. Louie resumes his journey to the airport where he eschews the Mexican holiday with his sister and instead buys a ticket to China.¹³

The final act of this season finale was filmed in and around Beijing, China. There, Louie gets lost searching for the Yangtze River. He is welcomed into a small, rural home where a group of friendly Chinese invite him in. A meal is served. He knows no Chinese, and yet they try to talk to one another anyway, laughing at their own attempt.¹⁴ Their shared meal and, more importantly, their shared humanity are somehow enough for Louie to experience a wonderful connection. Work, family, and romance have all failed, but, for one episode, Louie shakes off his loneliness when he abandons himself to the infinite richness of human experience found in the larger global community.¹⁵

N.Y.P.D. Blue's workplace-as-family theme moved back into comedies like *The Office* (NBC, 2005-13) and *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, 2009-15). The characters in *The Office* work for a paper company; they are literally paper pushers, trapped in white collar boredom, but they make the most of it. Two of the main characters, Jim and Pam eventually get married, finding true love at the office. Moreover, as Jim and Pam bond with their bizarre yet strangely lovable coworkers, they find unexpected fulfillment in their workplace community even while their labor remains largely unsatisfying.

The justice system's procedural effectiveness depicted in *Law & Order* and the utopian potential of a loving family and community imagined on *The Simpsons* remained...in *Law & Order* and *The Simpsons*. *Law & Order*'s various spin-offs, most notably *Law & Order: Special*

¹³ "New Year's Eve," *Louie*, season three, episode 13 (FX, September 27, 2012).

¹⁴ Importantly, dialogue is not translated into captions. However, I once happened to watch the episode with a Chinese person who reported that the friendly hosts, upon learning Louie's name, ask if he is from France. Louie unwittingly confirms this fact.

¹⁵ I recommend watching episodes 10-13 of season three to appreciate this story.

Victims Unit (discussed briefly in chapter three) have spent more time exploring the life of their main characters, but stories remain essentially episodic, perfect for timeless syndication throughout cable's schedule.

While *The Simpsons*'s rich depiction of a flawed yet ultimately wonderful town remains unique, its central focus on the suburban, two-generation family remains a common feature of American sitcoms. One of the most popular sitcoms, *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-present), epitomizes the ways sitcoms have stretched the definition of family to encompass its contemporary complexities.¹⁶ The show is actually about an extended family, which includes remarried divorcees, a gay couple, and an adopted daughter. Other families in recent sitcoms vary by class or ethnicity.¹⁷ All of these shows emphasize the family as the strongest and most positive organizing force on their characters' social life.

The X-Files and *Touched by an Angel* are hardest to connect into the post-2000 television landscape. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks did not end the age of irony and bring about a resurgence of the kind of earnest, unironic search for meaning depicted in these two shows. No network television shows deal with religious themes as explicitly as *Touched by an Angel* did. Nor did any show try to bridge the wide gap of the culture wars quite like *The X-Files* did through Scully and Mulder. We shall see what the upcoming rebirth of that show looks like in January 2016.¹⁸ *Parks and Recreation* does address the political divisions in America in its

¹⁶ While it was not getting the same ratings as *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-present; itself, a *Friends*-inspired sitcom), *Modern Family* averaged more than 10 million viewers per episode in its first five seasons, winning five straight Emmy awards for "Outstanding Comedy Series." James Hibberd, "'Modern Family' Hits Season Low: Why Are Ratings Slipping?" *Entertainment Weekly*, February 7, 2013, accessed November 18, 2015, <http://www.ew.com/article/2013/02/07/modern-family-ratings>.

¹⁷ For example, *The Middle* (ABC, 2009-present) is about a working class family; *Black-ish* (2014-present) is about an African-American family; *Fresh off the Boat* (ABC, 2015-present), set in the mid-1990s, is about a Chinese-American family.

¹⁸ Fox is planning only six episodes of *The X-Files* in 2016, with no future seasons announced, although, of course, good ratings could mean more episodes.

particular formulation of opposites successfully working together. Out of their workplace-as-family, a loving partnership forms between the liberal-minded, pro-government Leslie Knope and the libertarian, government-despising Ron Swanson.

TV and Reality

Besides exploring the messages and meanings television broadcast to its audience in the nineties, I have attempted to demonstrate the usefulness of such an investigation for cultural history. While the problem of audience reception prevents us from knowing exactly how Americans negotiated television's stories and messages, I believe we can accept that television, including its fictional programs, is somehow influential in shaping many different ways viewers think about their world.

Television was and remains an extremely popular form of entertainment and communication in America, and network television reached a mass audience more consistently in the nineties than it did in the subsequent decades. The nineties viewing experience was still a shared experience, though the audience was already beginning to fragment as the number of channels continued to increase. Moreover, viewers had a second and potentially richer opportunity at creating a social connection as they linked with other fans to talk about a particular episode in the days after it aired. Critics described *Seinfeld* as a "water cooler" show, and many other television shows provoked conversations between Americans at office coffee pots, bars, and other remaining "third places."¹⁹ We can imagine that many of those conversations must have been about comparing the show's version of reality with the viewer's own perception of the world. This comparison could work in both directions whenever

¹⁹ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*, 2nd ed. (New York: Marlowe, 1997).

something that happened in the real world reminded the viewer of a show. For example, a person experiences a comical series of coincidences, recounts them to a friend, and they conclude his story could be an episode of *Seinfeld*. A spooky noise in the attic could be an episode of *The X-Files*. A lost set of keys sounds like a case for *Law & Order*. Fictional television thus become a way to sort life experiences into categories that are then understandable to anyone else familiar with the show in discussion. Investigating the ideologies of these television shows thus helps suggest some of the ways millions of Americans categorized their world.

Moreover, television influences language, which shapes the way people process reality. *Seinfeld* suggested dozens of labels for personality quirks and physical traits that subsequently filtered into real world dialogue, including phrases like “close talker,” “man hands,” and “Soup Nazi.” Other shows may not have been as famous for supplying specific phrases, but surely the language of any show watched for 100 episodes or more will integrate itself into viewers’ vocabulary, affecting the way they talk and think.

When it resembles reality, television may also provide catharsis. A viewer may see his or her own particular problems grappled with on a television show and thus realize he is not alone in his suffering. He may even be able to work out his own realistic reactions to a problem by using the relevant episode as an example of what to do, or more likely, what not to do.

These are just a few of the ways television influences Americans’ intellectual life. Admittedly, they are more suggestive than definitive. Nevertheless, I am convinced it is better to offer carefully contextualized speculation about television’s cultural influence than to deny it any agency by merely thinking of it as a mirror for reality.

Nineties TV and Community: An Assessment

The final question, then, is one of assessment. If television influenced perceptions of reality in elusive yet potentially powerful ways, did nineties television offer ways to improve America's various problems of community? Or did television, in its various depictions of community fragmentation, reinforce social disengagement? If a viewer decided, consciously or unconsciously, to follow the ideology of each of these nineties shows, would he or she seek greater community involvement or retreat from it?

As I have suggested, *Seinfeld's* finale emphasizes a critical message about its socially isolated characters. However, this critique is lost in the shows that cloned *Seinfeld's* formula throughout the nineties, most notably *Friends*. The nineties friends-as-family sitcoms did not, ultimately, promote wider community engagement.

N.Y.P.D. Blue, *ER*, and other nineties dramas emphasized a workplace family which helped characters improve their deepest flaws and seemed to offer a largely fulfilling life in service of the community. And yet, these characters remained tethered to their workplace. They may have labored nobly on behalf of the community, but as focused as they were on their work, they lacked both the time and inclination to be a part of the community beyond the workplace. The consequence of the workplace-as-family community meant that a character's entire life revolved around his job, to the detriment of his other relationships. Except when characters built a real family with a co-worker, their dedication to their work frequently took a heavy toll on their family at home. Among other consequences, such an intense focus on work does not help create a community with broader, diverse forms of interaction.²⁰

²⁰ The centrality of the workplace community on *N.Y.P.D. Blue* suggests a limit to recent trends in real world law enforcement. So-called "community policing," which became increasingly popular in the nineties, calls for police to spend more time out in the community which they are protecting, interacting with its citizens. But as long as cops are so intensely identifying with their co-workers as the essential

Law & Order and other procedural dramas emphasized an effective justice system that left no reason for law abiding citizens to worry about social lawlessness. Furthermore, this ideology implied that critique and dissent was unnecessary for and even dangerous to American society. The show also suggested that individual flaws, much more than social flaws, are the main sources of crime in America. The nineties viewer, living in a period of declining crime and rising prosperity, was thus liberated from concerns about society to pursue his or her own individual happiness.

Broadly, *Touched by an Angel* and *The X-Files* succeeded in raising substantial existential questions for a mass audience. *Touched by an Angel* was limited in its narrow focus on broken families; it very rarely dwelt on other societal flaws present in America in the nineties. It also rather troublingly suggested that death must play a central role in meaningful personal transformation. Finally, *Touched by an Angel* suggested religion is most of all a source of therapeutic healing of the self, epitomizing Philip Rieff's critique in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*.²¹

In *The X-Files*, on the other hand, its characters did search not only for personal well-being but also to discover an explanation for human existence. The answer to the question of "Why are we here?" may also suggest ways to save humanity from destruction and advance human progress to further greatness. Moreover, *The X-Files* showed that the search for meaning

community to which they belong, they will never feel a part of the outside community which they serve. The greater The greater community is ultimately both a source of problems which they are tasked with solving and a source of source of threats to their workplace family. "Community Policing Defined," U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2014, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/vets-to-cops/e030917193-CP-Defined.pdf>.

²¹ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic; Uses of Faith after Freud*, (1966; repr., ed. Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 254.

is best carried out through a partnership between science and faith, thus rejecting the divisiveness of the culture wars.

Finally, *The Simpsons* suggested that familial love can overcome individual flaws and foster a healthy family life. The larger community also thrived despite the flaws of its citizens because its people consistently valued the common good. The opening sequence of the show emphasizes the strong pull of the home on the hearts of its characters; even its central character is called “Homer.” Perhaps when we start to value the state of relationships in our familial homes, our hometowns, and our homeland, we will begin to experience the subtly appealing community life depicted in *The Simpsons*.

I could have reversed the order of the chapters, making the depiction of a thriving community in *The Simpsons* chapter one and concluding with the loneliness of *Seinfeld*. I suppose the organization betrays my own cautious optimism. The crisis of community has not abated, and sometimes it seems Americans have completely lost the ability to have a genuine conversation. But it is *The Simpsons*, not *Seinfeld*, which outlasted every scripted show on television. Its ratings are now unremarkable but steady, and several networks recently had a bidding war for the show’s library of more than 500 old episodes.²² Television executives seem to think American viewers will not soon tire of spending time with the community in *The Simpsons*.

We humans are social creatures, and on some innate level we appreciate a healthy community whenever we experience it. Surely we can do even better than the flawed four-fingered characters on *The Simpsons*. If, through art like television or through real conversation,

²² Cynthia Littleton, “‘The Simpsons’ Lands \$750 Mil Cable Syndication VOD Pact with FXX,” *Variety* (November 19, 2013).

we can remind ourselves of both the personal and collective value of a more vibrant community, perhaps we will take more steps to construct it. At the very least, *The Simpsons* stokes our longing for community, keeping it alive from the lonely nineties to today.

Viewing List

Suggested viewing as a supplement for each chapter:

Chapter One

“The Finale.” *Seinfeld*, season nine, episode 22. Aired on NBC, May 14, 1998.

Streaming: Hulu (Pay subscription required)

DVD: *Seinfeld*. Season nine. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007.

Available through the Onondaga County Public Library.

On air: Saturday, November 28, 2015, 8:00 AM, TBS.

“The One with the Bullies.” *Friends*, season two, episode 21. Aired on NBC, April 25, 1996.

Streaming: Netflix (Pay subscription required)

Amazon video (\$1.99)

DVD: *Friends*. The Complete Second Season. Warner Home Video, 2010.

Available through the Onondaga County Public Library.

“Larry Eats a Pancake.” *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, season one, episode one. July 19, 2012.

Streaming: comediansincarsgettingcoffee.com (Free)

<http://comediansincarsgettingcoffee.com/larry-david-larry-eats-a-pancake>

Chapter Two

“Raging Bulls.” *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, season six, episode eight. Aired on ABC, December 15, 1998.

Streaming: Amazon prime (Pay subscription required)

“Rodney King Video,” March 3, 1991.

Streaming: <https://vault.fbi.gov/rodney-king/video/rodney-king-video>. (Free)

Chapter Three

“White Rabbit.” *Law & Order*, season five, episode five. Aired on NBC, October 19, 1994.

DVD: *Law & Order*. The Fifth Year, 1994-1995 season. Universal, 2011.

Available through the Onondaga County Public Library.

Chapter Four

“Gethsemane.” *The X-Files*, season four, episode 24. Aired on Fox, May 18, 1997.

DVD: *The X-Files*. Season four. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001.

Available through the Onondaga County Public Library.

Streaming: Netflix (Pay subscription required)

Amazon Prime (Pay subscription required)

Amazon Video (\$1.99)

“The Medium and the Message.” *Touched by an Angel*, season five, episode 13. Aired on CBS, January 10, 1999.

DVD: *Touched by an Angel*. The Fifth Season. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2012.

Available through the Onondaga County Public Library.

Chapter Five

“*The Simpsons* Opening Sequence.”

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNzoJqzA6zM>

This version is from “Marge vs. the Monorail.” *The Simpsons*, season four, episode 12. Aired on Fox, January 14, 1993.

“*The Simpsons* Opening Sequence.” *Simpsons Wiki*. (Broken down with screen grabs.)

http://simpsons.wikia.com/wiki/Opening_Sequence

(That article discusses all iterations of the opening sequence, one by one, in chronological order. Note that Chapter Five analyzes the opening sequence as it ran from 1990-2009.)

“Homer’s Enemy.” *The Simpsons*, season eight, episode 23. Aired on Fox, May 4, 1997.

DVD: *The Simpsons*. The Complete Eighth Season. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2006.

Available through the Onondaga County Public Library.

Streaming: simpsonsworld.com (Available free with participating television service.)

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Friends. Seasons 1-10. Aired 1994-2004, on NBC. Streaming video. Netflix, 2015-present.

Law & Order. Seasons 1-20. Aired 1990-2010, on NBC. Streaming video. Netflix, 2012-2014. DVDs. Universal, 2002-11.

N.Y.P.D. Blue. Seasons 1-12. Aired 1993-2005, on ABC. Streaming video. Amazon Prime, 2014?-present.

Seinfeld. Seasons 1-9. Aired 1989-98, on NBC. DVDs. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2004-07.

The Simpsons. Seasons 1-27. Aired 1989-present, on Fox. Streaming video. FX Now, 2014-present. DVDs. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001-present.

Touched by an Angel. Seasons 1-9. Aired 1994-2003, on CBS. DVDs. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2004-2013.

The X-Files. Seasons 1-9. Aired 1993-2002, on Fox. Streaming video. Amazon Prime, 2014?-present.

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