

Quirky Quality Television: Revisiting *Northern Exposure*
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Introduction

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Cicely, in other words, like all great pastoral, is a myth that knows it's a myth and invites us, every week, to share the secret that the lies of our innocence are our innocence. It's a consensual hallucination of the primal Garden, and without the skeptical Fleishman it would fall apart just because Joel's skepticism, like that of Shakespeare's fools, keeps reminding us that this ideal little place can't be real: and, by the same token, must be real, because we all dream it so desperately.

Frank McConnell

Among the contributors to *Northern Exposure's* six year run on the American television network CBS were David Chase (executive producer for seasons Five and Six), the writing teams of Robin Green and Mitchell Burgess and Diane Frolov and Andrew Schneider (Two through Six), and directors James Hayman (Three, Five, and Six), Jack Bender (Three), and Daniel Attias (Four and Five). In the still largely authorless world of television, even avid *Northerners* still might not recognize any of these for-the-most-part-invisible contributions to the hit dramedy. Nor will followers of *The Sopranos*, the masterful "not TV" series Chase would later sow on HBO's fertile ground, likely recognize, without the aid of the Internet Movie Data Base, that seven of his collaborators had followed him from Alaska to New Jersey.

In a conversation with Allen Rucker, Chase, a disenchanting twenty-plus year network veteran, would acknowledge that hating 'everything that corporate America had to offer. I considered network TV to be propaganda for the corporate state – the programming not only the commercials. I'm not a Marxist and I never was very radical, but that's what I considered it to be. To some extent, I still do.'¹ *Northern Exposure*, the series that had once supplied his paychecks, was not immune to his scorn: The quality television series that is the subject of this special issue of *Critical Studies in Television* was, for Chase, 'propaganda for the corporate state. . . . it was ramming home every week the message that "life is nothing but great," "Americans are great," and "heartfelt emotion and sharing conquers [sic] everything."²

On *The Sopranos* Chase has, of course, freed himself from the need for such messages, delivering an exceptional series which, as it comes to its end in early 2007, may have painted itself into a narrative corner. *The Sopranos'* relentlessly dark view of contemporary America, devoid of any redeemable character, offers us virtually no comforts and gives us hardly any cause to like it other than its own brilliance.

Northern Exposure did not end well either. Its good fortune had gone up-river with Joel Fleischman when he went native in Season Six, never to return, though the series continued on for a season before the plug was pulled, but in its day there was nothing quite like it.³ Far from being propaganda for the dominant culture, it was the most intellectual, imaginative, challenging dramedy series of the early 1990s, a show that gave us every reason to like it—to come running, ready to watch, laugh, and think, when the eagle cried and the moose walked the early morning streets of Cicely.⁴

As the late Frank McConnell would note in a brilliant 1993 piece in *Commonweal*, *Northern Exposure* was really a pastoral, a myth of a "Special Place—the Secret Garden . . . where you can take all your everyday cares and, by playing at a simpler, more natural life, have them clarified and healed." "The glory of pastoral," McConnell adds, "is that it recognizes play as a profoundly religious act. . . ."⁵

Northern Exposure was always at play, always in play, and it required us to play with it.

Ready to play its own special kind of game, television studies, not surprisingly, has paid more than a few visits to Cicely. *Northern Exposure*, after all, seemed to need viewers/readers with our special skills. Someone had to make sense of these fascinating, eccentric characters, those proliferating literary allusions, those charming tropes, those mythemes galore.

Though we do not yet have a book on *Northern Exposure*, the periodical *Mid-Atlantic Almanac* devoted most of an issue to the series,⁶ including essays by Crawford, Pringle and Shearer, and Taylor ("Landscape of the West"⁷); and Annette M. Taylor has authored (or co-authored) no less than three significant essays on the show: the above-named piece, 'Cultural Heritage in *Northern Exposure*,' 'Landscape of the West in *Northern Exposure*,'⁸ and (with David Upchurch) '*Northern Exposure* and Mythology of the Global Community,'⁹ which taken together offer something like a sustained imaginal geography of *NE*.

Northern Exposure has to date inspired a variety of other essays. Feminist themes have been explored in Leda M. Cooks and Roger C. Aden's '*Northern Exposure*'s Sense of Place: Constructing and Marginalizing the Patriarchal Community,'¹⁰ Mary Beth Pringle and Cynthia L. Shearer's 'The Female Spirit of *Northern Exposure*'s Cicely, Alaska,'¹¹ and Sasha Torres' 'Lesbische Migrationen, televisuelle frontiers: *Northern Exposure*.'¹² Iain Crawford has investigated its intertextuality in 'Reading TV: Intertextuality in *Northern Exposure*.'¹³ Its Jewishness has been the focus of Michael L. Hecht, et al's 'Looking through '*Northern Exposure*' at Jewish American identity and the communication theory of identity'¹⁴ and a chapter in David Zurawik's *The Jews of Prime Time*: 'Dr. Fleischman and the Captivity Narrative.'¹⁵ The created community of the series has attracted the attention of Jessica Johnston and Joseph Raab's 'The Utopian Community of *Northern Exposure*.'¹⁶ Esther Romeyn and Jack Kugelmass's 'Writing Alaska, Writing the Nation: '*Northern Exposure*' and the Quest for a New America'¹⁷ and Willard A. Underwood's 'The Image of America through a Contemporary Alaskan Model: *Northern Exposure*'s Celebration of Diversity'¹⁸ have considered *Northern Exposure* as a distinctly American narrative. And the series' contributions to the development of contemporary television has been the focus of Christine Scodari's entry in *The Encyclopedia of Television*,¹⁹ Michael J. Porter's 'The Function of Scenes in Television Narratives,'²⁰ and Betsy Williams' 'North to the Future: *Northern Exposure* and Quality Television.'²¹

These pages offer the fullest, and most multi-faceted, consideration of *Northern Exposure* to date. Rhonda Wilcox (in an award-winning, previously published essay, reprinted here)²² interprets male and female, body and spirit, in *NE*'s dreamlife. Janet McCabe discusses the series' alteration of "masculine frontier mythology." David Lavery takes a look at an episode of *NE* in which Chris must wrestle with post-structuralist critical theory. Felicia Chan tenders a narratological assessment. Jimmie Cain examines real and metaphoric war in *NE*. Meg Albrinck compares it to a surprisingly similar BBC cousin. John Zubizarreta explores the duplicitous role of doubling in *NE*, and David Scott Diffrient's mini-monograph offers a meticulous analysis of the role of movies in the series.

¹ Allen Rucker, *The Sopranos: A Family History*, New American Library, 2000.

² For more on Chase's views on television, see David Lavery and Robert J. Thompson, 'David Chase, *The Sopranos*, and Television Creativity', *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos*, Columbia University Press, 2002, pp.18-25.

³ In its day, *Northern Exposure* was, of course, often compared to its contemporary *Twin Peaks*, both examples of what Robert J. Thompson would deem 'quirky quality'. As Thompson would write:

In July 1990, CBS offered up something for all those viewers who were spending the summer wondering who killed Laura Palmer. Though *Northern Exposure* was set in the fictional town of Cicely, Alaska, it was filmed in Roslyn, Washington, just down the road a piece from Snoqualmie, the town that stood in for Twin Peaks. The similarities between the two shows didn't stop with the scenery either. *Northern Exposure* had its own rural quirkiness, surreal story lines, and ensemble of off centered characters. It wasn't just an imitation, however. *Northern Exposure* had already been conceived and developed before *Twin Peaks* premiered. The striking similarities between these two independently created series suggests that quality TV was following a distinct evolutionary path. The artistic mandate for innovation that had engendered *Twin Peaks* had apparently been yielding similar results elsewhere as well (*Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER*, Continuum, 1996, pp.160-61).

⁴ Frank McConnell's thoughts on *Northern Exposure*'s moose must be quoted: 'As the only really "natural" thing in the whole show, that hairy and charming fellow reminds us at the beginning of every instalment how fictional, constructed, and human is all that follows his initial stroll through town. A real moose in a made-up town: wasn't it Mary Anne Moore [sic] who defined poetry as imaginary gardens with real toads in them?' '*Northern Exposure*,' *Commonweal*, 120, 19, 5 November 1993, p.19.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.20.

⁶ 'Popular Culture Meets *Northern Exposure*: Three Perspectives on the Popular CBS Program', *The Mid-Atlantic Almanack: The Journal of the Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association*, 3, 1994, pp.13-39.

⁷ 'Landscape of the West in *Northern Exposure*', *The Mid-Atlantic Almanack: The Journal of the Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association*, 3, 1994, pp.23-33.

⁸ 'Cultural Heritage in *Northern Exposure*', in S. Elizabeth Bird, ed, *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the American Popular Culture*, Westview Press, 1996, 229-44.

⁹ '*Northern Exposure* and Mythology of the Global Community', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 30, 2, Fall, pp.75-85.

¹⁰ Leda M. Cooks and Roger C. Aden (1995), '*Northern Exposure*'s Sense of Place: Constructing and Marginalizing the Matriarchal Community', *Women's Studies in Communication*, 18, 1, Spring, pp.1-17.

¹¹ Mary Beth Pringle and Cynthia L. Shearer, 'The Female Spirit of Northern Exposure's Cicely, Alaska,' *The Mid-Atlantic Almanack: The Journal of the Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association*, 3, 1994, pp. 34-39.

¹² Sasha Torres, 'Lesbische Migrationen, televisuelle frontiers: *Northern Exposure*', *Montage/AV: Zeitschrift für Theorie und Geschichte audiovisueller Kommunikation*, 4, 2, pp.40-62.

¹³ Iain Crawford, 'Reading TV: Intertextuality in *Northern Exposure*', *The Mid-Atlantic Almanack: The Journal of the Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association*, 3, 1994, pp.14-22.

¹⁴ Michael Hecht, et al., 'Jewish American identity: A Communication Theory of Identity Analysis of the Television Series *Northern Exposure*,' *Journal of Communication*, 52, 4, 2002, pp.852-869.

¹⁵ David Zurawik, *The Jews of Prime Time*, Brandeis University Press, 2003.

¹⁶ Jessica Johnston and Josef Raab, 'The Utopian Community of *Northern Exposure*', *Popular Culture Review*, 5, 2, August 1994, pp.73-85.

¹⁷ Esther Romeyn and Jack Kugelmass, 'Writing Alaska, Writing the Nation: *Northern Exposure* and the Quest for a New America', in Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens, eds, '*Writing*' Nation and '*Writing*' Region in America. VU University Press, 1996, pp. 252-67.

¹⁸ Underwood, Willard A. and Janice M. Underwood, 'The Image of America through a Contemporary Alaskan Model: *Northern Exposure*'s Celebration of Diversity', in Will Wright and Steven Kaplan, eds, *The Image of America in Literature, Media, and Society*, pp. 358-60.

¹⁹ Scodari, Christine, '*Northern Exposure*: U.S. Dramedy', in *Encyclopedia of Television*

<<http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/N/htmlN/northernexpo/northernexpo.htm>>

²⁰ Michael J. Porter, 'The Function of Scenes in Television Narratives'. *Creative Screenwriting*, 1, 2, Summer, 1996, pp.94-116.

²¹ Betsy Williams, 'North to the Future: *Northern Exposure* and Quality Television', *Spectator*, 13, 3, 1993, pp.28-39. Republished in Horace Newcomb, ed, *Television: The Critical View*, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 141-54.

²² Rhonda V. Wilcox, '"In Your Dreams, Fleischman": Dr. Flesh and the Dream of the Spirit in *Northern Exposure*,' *Studies in Popular Culture*, 15,2, 1993, pp.1-13. Included in this issue.