Chapter 3

The Andy Griffith Show: Mayberry as Working-Class Utopia

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Scholars note that film and television productions have the ability, through their storylines and visual imagery, to create powerful fictional places that capture the public’s imagination and symbolize certain ideas (and ideals) within society (Aitken and Zonn). The imaginary community of Mayberry, North Carolina, is an example of one of these media-created or “reel” places that has achieved iconic status within American popular culture. As the setting for the highly successful television comedy, *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960–68), Mayberry valorizes while also creating caricatures of ordinary, working people and the idyllic and simple nature of small-town life. The show was part of a rural comedy programming trend at the time, a departure from the ethnic urban and WASP suburban family sitcoms of the 1950s (O’Leary and Worland). These comedies were intended to tap a growing television audience in rural, working-class America. A Nielsen study conducted in *Andy Griffith’s* last season of production found it to be the top show among blue-collar viewers and number three among white-collar viewers (Kelly). Other examples of this rural genre included the more farcical comedies of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Petticoat Junction*, and *Green Acres*. While these television shows remain popular, they lack the high quality of storytelling and emotional realism of *Andy Griffith* and they have not inspired the same degree of fan devotion.

Mayberry remains a popular place on the television landscape, even though it has been over 50 years since *Andy Griffith* premiered. The show has never left the air, thanks to syndication, cable channels such as WGN, TBS, and TV Land, and the recent explosion of Internet television.
the many classic television shows rebroadcast on TV Land, *Andy Griffith* is “among its top three most-watched . . . programs, drawing 47 percent more viewers than the network average” for all shows (W. Curtis 48). *The Christian Science Monitor* reported several years ago that as many as 5 million people a day in America watch reruns of the show (Reuter). According to the fan website “A Mayberry State of Mind,” there are over 1,300 chapters of The Andy Griffith Show Rerun Watchers Club inside and outside the United States. Reruns resonate not only with viewers of the original broadcasts but also later generations, suggesting that Mayberry has a certain timeless power as a “reel place” even as the circumstances of our “real” world change.

Much of Mayberry’s mass appeal is due to its utopian qualities. It represents a traditional working-class community where social cooperation, egalitarianism, and good will win out over conflict, elitism, and self-interest. Community members know and help each other, regardless of social position, personal failing, or eccentricity. And Mayberry is filled with its share of eccentrics—from Otis Campbell (played by Hal Smith), the town drunk who voluntarily locks himself in the city jail to sleep off a bender, to Ernest T. Bass (played by Howard Morris), a nutty hillbilly who throws rocks through windows and speaks in rhyme (“I don’t chew my cabbage twice. You ain’t heard the last of Ernest T. Bass”). Watching *Andy Griffith* “vicariously places us in a benevolent social world in which human foibles are forgivable and . . . where even foolishness can feel at home” (Sanes np).

As Don Vaughn observes, “In virtually every episode, there are instances of at least one character being sensitive to someone else’s needs, problems, and feelings” (420).

Problems do exist in Mayberry, but they tend to be small and solvable in a half hour. The show’s feature character, Sheriff Andy Taylor (Andy Griffith), solves most of these problems using his wit and folksy wisdom. Because Mayberry is not a hub of criminal activity, Andy spends most of his time protecting the town’s citizens from themselves, sometimes without their knowing it. A widower, Andy’s domestic life is devoted to teaching important moral lessons to son Opie (Ron Howard) and reassuring Aunt Bee (Francis Bavier), who lives with and cares for them, “of her value to the community and the Taylor household” (Geist 945). A strong insecurity haunts Bee Taylor and many Mayberrians, who are easily intimidated and swayed by outside public scrutiny. Andy actively maintains the self-esteem and social bonds of his working-class community. Perhaps no one benefits more from Andy’s protection than his deputy, the hypervigilant yet bumbling Barney Fife (played by Don Knotts). Because Barney fre-
quently discharges his gun by accident, he is only allowed by Andy to have
a single bullet and he must carry it in his front shirt pocket rather than
in his gun.

As a utopia, Mayberry represents a simpler and kinder place for work-
ing people. “The serenity of Mayberry was seemingly uninfluenced by
hard news... a place of tranquility in a world of anything but that”
(Vaughn 397). When the show originally aired, the fictional North Car-
olina hamlet seemed a world away from the major challenges of the time,
such as the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, student demonstra-
tions, the assassinations of major political leaders, and anxiety over nuclear
war. Current viewers now face a different yet no less threatening set of chal-
lenges, but in Mayberry, there is no threat of terrorism and no mention of
the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The small town is seemingly unaffected
by the high unemployment and mass foreclosure that increasingly face the
working class.

While the allure of Andy Griffith comes from the show being apart from
the real world, “the citizens of Mayberry are both aware of, and recogniz-
ably a part of, the world at large,” or at least the world as it may have once
existed (O’Leary and Worland 78, emphasis added). For some viewers, Andy
Griffith satisfies a growing public desire to reclaim traditional community
values and attachments of the past, even if those values and attachments
never existed exactly in the romanticized form presented on television.
Griffith has insisted on many occasions that Mayberry is a mythical place,
but this has not stopped fans from treating the town as if it really existed
and holding up the community as a sociological truth. As Geoffrey Camp-
bell asserts, “The Andy Griffith Show is not so much a time capsule of what
was, but a road map of what can continue to be” (np). Nostalgic references
to Mayberry appear in contemporary activities and conversations—from
religious instruction to the way in which some real-life places are identi-

ied and represented, including the conversion of Griffith’s hometown of
Mount Airy, North Carolina, into a tourist attraction.

In this essay, we examine the image of Mayberry in greater depth, how
it is represented as a working-class utopia both on screen and off-screen,
and how the town’s idyllic identity is open to debate and a more dystopian
interpretation. As Guy Baeten asserts: “Utopia and dystopia are two sides
of the same coin: what reads as a utopia for some [people]... is decidedly
dystopian for others” (150–51). Depending on one’s perceptions, experi-
ences, and social position, Mayberry might represent a place of hope and
compassion for working people (utopia) or a place of fear and intolerance
(dystopia). Despite the emphasis on harmony and social acceptance we find
at work in Mayberry, Andy Griffith enacts an exclusive view of community in which not all working-class people appear to belong. Of particular concern is the way in which Mayberry is a site for constructing an image of the working class in which African Americans are rarely seen and almost never heard. This tension between Mayberry as utopia versus dystopia is evident both when analyzing episodes of Andy Griffith and when examining how the seemingly imaginary town is invoked “on the ground” by people today.

**Mayberry as On-Screen Utopia/Dystopia**

As a utopia, Mayberry is a place where the economic pressures of working-class life are minimized and presumably less important than maintaining family and community bonds. For instance, in the case of the usually inebriated Otis Campbell, there is little discussion of how he earns a living or how his alcoholism (a word never used in Mayberry by the way) affects his employment status. In one episode, Andy allows Otis to pose as a deputy to impress visiting relatives, allowing him to feign employment he otherwise would never have to maintain family harmony. Economic hardships, such as foreclosures, evictions, and unemployment, do occur in Mayberry, but they are easily remedied when they appear. In “Mayberry Goes Bankrupt,” Andy is ordered by the town council to evict an old man, Frank Meyers, from his dilapidated home. In a reversal of fortune, Andy discovers that Frank holds a 100-year-old municipal bond, which is now worth a great deal of money. Unable to pay off the bond, city council members are quick to fix up Frank’s house and make it one of the nicest in town. Eventually, Andy determines that the bond is worthless (it was purchased with Confederate currency) and the old man again faces eviction. Andy convinces Mayberry leaders to allow Frank to keep his home since it is now such a valuable landmark. In another episode (“Andy Forecloses”), grouchy wealthy businessman Ben Weaver pushes Andy to foreclose on the farm of Lester Scoby, who is unemployed and has missed his first mortgage payment. Weaver, who Andy describes as having “all the money in town and all the meanness,” holds the mortgage on the property and is unwilling to give the Scobys more time since he wants to build a warehouse on the land. Andy finds a way of delaying the foreclosure process. He also works with others in Mayberry to raise money to help out, although they fall short and the eviction must be carried out. In order for Ben to understand what he is doing to the Scobys, Andy pretends to be mean to the family as he orders them to leave the house and suggests that “the county will take care of the
kids and Lester can build a shack somewhere.” Seeing this display of inhumanity, Ben stops the foreclosure and then hires Lester to work for him. In Mayberry, the feelings and needs of the working class are important and cannot be disregarded. *Andy Griffith* does not shy away from exposing the greed and insensitivity of those with more social power while also recognizing the potential of everyone, regardless of wealth and privilege, to do the right thing.

The utopian allure of *Andy Griffith* does not necessarily come from Mayberry being represented as a classless society, although income distinctions are frequently deemphasized in the show. Rather, what is important is the way in which working people are represented as having an inherently legitimate worldview relative to the wealthy or the elite. When members of the upper class are depicted, they are usually part of a plot in which their social status and belief system are depicted as a potential weakness rather than being blindly celebrated. In an episode entitled “Man in a Hurry,” prominent businessman, Malcolm Tucker, breaks down on the outskirts of Mayberry on his way to an appointment in Charlotte the next morning. Because it is Sunday, Tucker finds it impossible to get his car fixed and he is critical of the slow pace of life in the small town. He becomes especially outraged in being unable to make a phone call because “the whole town has tacitly agreed to let two elderly sisters talk to each other uninterrupted (there is only one line) for three hours each Sunday afternoon” (O’Leary and Worland 77). Tucker is forced to spend a leisurely day with the Taylors, eventually realizing that he needs to reassess his values and priorities. “When his car is ready, he pretends to hear something in the engine—an excuse for him to spend some more time with Mayberrians, for he has begun to like their way of life” (Vaughn 409). Like Ben Weaver, Malcolm Tucker can undergo redemption by embracing Mayberry’s working-class culture and relaxing, but not necessarily abandoning, a profit-driven ideology. In this regard, there are clear limits to the way in which *Andy Griffith* is a vehicle for radical social change. It is not that capitalism is dead in Mayberry; it is simply a more humane capitalism.

In challenging the assumed superiority of the wealthy, Andy Griffith values his working-class identity and emphasizes the need to stay down to earth and even somewhat unrefined. The Darlings, a poor mountain family who regularly visit Mayberry, are praised for the backwoods music they play and Andy frequently joins these memorable picking sessions (“The Darlings Are Coming”). When British tourist Malcolm Merriweather bicycles into Mayberry and causes a traffic accident, he works off the damages by serving as Andy’s personal valet. Andy finds the situation very
uncomfortable and the employment arrangement eventually ends, but not before Merriweather makes Andy and Opie take midweek baths and dress formally for dinner. The plot for “Andy’s English Valet” also works to affirm the virtues of the rural common man over the sophisticated urbanite, which is a common theme of the television show. Andy shuns pretentiousness and sometimes has to remind his fellow Mayberrians to remain true to their basic, small-town ways. This is certainly the case when the traditional feel and look of Mayberry catches the interest of a Hollywood movie producer (“Mayberry Goes Hollywood”). Citizens respond to the possibility of becoming a film location by changing the town’s appearance, putting on new and different clothes, and adopting fake personalities. “Andy, of course, resists this foolishness and in the climax, he and the producer are barely able to stop the citizens, who now look something like a well-dressed lynch mob, from cutting down the town’s most ancient oak because they think it is spoiling the appearance of the main street” (O’Leary and Worland 78–79). Mayberry is a place to preserve the authentic culture of ordinary, working people rather than giving into the pressure of being something, socially, that you are not.

In valorizing working-class life and sensibilities, Mayberry recognizes the value of the worker, although labor politics is certainly not a major theme in the show. Like the traditional South in which it is set, Andy Griffith says little (if any) about unions or worker rights per se. The show’s positive depiction of working people is part of a broad belief in human dignity and giving everyone a fair shake. This is illustrated in the episode, “Gomer the House Guest.” Gomer Pyle (Jim Nabors), a gas attendant and mechanic at Wally’s Service Station, is fired for talking too much and not being more attentive to waiting customers. Because Gomer sleeps in a room at the filling station, the firing makes him homeless and he asks Andy if he can sleep in a jail cell until his situation changes. Andy invites Gomer to stay at his house instead, but soon regrets it. Gomer’s late night chores keep the Taylor family up. These chores include fixing the cars of his former customers, who come at all hours of the day and night. After learning that Wally’s business has struggled since Gomer’s firing and finding his driveway crowded with people needing repairs, Andy leads everyone to Wally’s Service Station and helps Gomer get his job back. Andy even convinces a contrite Wally to put an extra hot plate and ice box in Gomer’s room in the back of the service station. The following dialogue between Wally and Andy demonstrates how Mayberry serves as a place for asserting the importance of labor:
ANDY: See that fellow there?
WALLY: Yeah, that’s Gomer.
ANDY: That’s more than Gomer. That’s your business.

Gomer’s situation has a happy ending, as is often the case in Mayberry, and recognition of Gomer’s value to Wally’s business is an idyllic counterpoint to the real history of worker exploitation in the South and the growing movement across the United States of using large temporary work forces and treating labor as an expendable commodity. After all, few of us have an Andy Taylor to intercede on our behalf with the boss. Moreover, depicting Andy as the wise problem solver invariably requires representing Gomer and other Mayberry citizens as hicks or bumpkins. This makes for good comedy but it reduces the likelihood of portraying Mayberry’s working people as social agents capable of actively reshaping their own circumstances. The episode ends with Gomer visiting the Taylor house to thank Andy for his help. While a highly skilled mechanic (he can diagnose car problems immediately), Gomer is not a good advocate for himself and is rather naive about the politics of the workplace. For instance, he initially describes his firing as “strange,” even though he had been yelled at by Wally repeatedly for not working fast enough. When Gomer proposes applying for a butcher position at the market, Andy asks: “You know anything about cutting meat?” He responds: “You think they’ll ask me that?” Mayberry is a utopia in the sense that things work out for working people despite themselves rather than necessarily because of themselves.

Andy also demonstrates his protection of working people through his own behavior as a boss. As Barney’s supervisor, Andy shows an incredible amount of patience and understanding toward his deputy. “Andy’s major aim [is] to prevent Barney from getting into serious trouble and to keep the sensitive Fife from discovering how gullible and inept he [is]” (Geist 945). This often involves Andy catching the few hardened criminals who find their way to Mayberry and manipulating the situation so that Barney gets credit for the collar and is thus seen as a hero (e.g., “Barney Gets his Man” and “Jailbreak”). In one episode, Taylor and girlfriend, Ellie Walker (played by Elinor Donahue), actually stage a minor robbery for Barney to solve to lift his spirits and self-esteem (“Andy the Matchmaker’’). In another episode, Andy and Helen Crump (played by Aneta Corsaut), his later girlfriend and eventual wife on the show, pretend to be trapped by a cave-in so that Barney can carry out a successful rescue plan and regain the trust of Mayberrians after an earlier snafu (“Barney and the Cave Rescue”). Even
when Barney leaves Mayberry to join the Raleigh police force, he depends on a visit from Andy to help solve a series of robberies, carried out by Barney’s landlady, of all people. Barney gets credit for the arrests, which keeps him from losing a job for which he is clearly unqualified (“A Visit to Barney Fife”). According to James Flanagan, Barney represents the “Other” or the marginalized. There are a host of Others in Mayberry who would be at the margins of real working-class communities in America. There is the absentminded barber, Floyd Lawson (Howard McNear), who cannot cut sideburns evenly and inadvertently allows a bookie to set up business in the barber shop. Then there is the naïve gas attendant, Goober Pyle (George Lindsey), who in one episode is tricked by Opie into believing that his new dog can talk (“A Man’s Best Friend”) and who works on cars inside the courthouse when he promises to mind the phone for Andy. As the moral leader or “boss” of the town, Andy salvages the dignity of these and other working people just as he constantly redeems Barney as a worthwhile employee and community member. “The inevitable acceptance and redemption of otherness is [The Andy Griffith Show’s] appeal and its claim to utopia” (Flanagan 315). However, as we discuss later in this essay, this embracing of otherness is not entirely complete in Mayberry and it may not represent a utopia to everyone.

The relationship between Andy and Barney is also helpful in drawing some important contrasts between their law enforcement approaches, which structure our discussion of a utopian Mayberry. According to Adam Dobrin, the real-world analogy to Andy’s law enforcement approach would be characterized as “community-oriented policing” while Barney represents the “professional police” approach. The professional approach stresses tight control over crime, a top-down authority structure, and limited community involvement. Barney shows more concern for introducing the latest developments in weaponry, jail technology, and police procedures than building community partnerships. This serves to alienate him from the citizens of Mayberry (“Citizen’s Arrest”). In contrast, Andy is “more interested in the quality of life issues that [affects] a small town than focusing his attentions on crime alone” (Dobrin 23). His job is not simply to enforce criminal codes and ordinances, but also to support normative daily activities and maintain social order, which requires him to “put lids on trash cans, [give] safety lectures at the high school, [pass] out Christmas baskets, and [keep] tabs on elderly residents” (Dobrin 23–24). Unlike Barney, Andy very seldom wears a gun; his authority does “not come from the threat of force, but rather from the implicit support of the community” (Dobrin 23).
In Mayberry, the sheriff is a friend of the working-class community, a social healer who resolves conflict—whether it means settling a feud between families or interceding in a couple's spat (Sanes). For some viewers, Andy is probably a welcomed departure from their own real-life experiences with law enforcement. Police do rule by force, sometimes excessive force, when it comes to interacting with working people. According to some commentators, we have moved into a “punitive” society in which concerns about security and protecting the upper class from crime and disorder have intensified social differences and taken precedence over community building (Herbert and Brown). There is a long history in the South of sheriffs and police chiefs being influential, paternalistic authority figures, but these figures were not necessarily as benevolent or ethical as Andy. It is important to remember that when the show originally aired in the 1960s, there were several highly visible instances of police in America violently putting down public demonstrations and protests. John O’Leary and Rick Worland perhaps express it best:

During the years in which Andy Taylor was the most popular southern sheriff in the country, at least as measured by the Nielsen ratings, network news also presented the most infamous one, “Bull” Connor, the commissioner of public safety in Birmingham, Alabama. Connor’s deputies, no Barney Fifes, used clubs, attack dogs, and fire hoses to assault peaceful civil rights demonstrators. (80)

One had to go no farther than Griffith’s home state of North Carolina to see how Andy Taylor’s approach to peacekeeping departed significantly from that of his real-world counterparts. In August 1961, less than a year after the premier of Andy Griffith, the police chief of Monroe, North Carolina, was anything but a social healer when he incited a riot by encouraging whites to attack local African Americans advocating for civil rights (Barksdale). Monroe is just 120 miles south of where Andy, the actor, grew up as a child.

While Andy Taylor’s approach to community relations is depicted as utopian, it also holds the seeds for creating a dystopian image of Mayberry. As Dobrin suggests, the possibility of unequal and unfair treatment is one of the disadvantages of Andy’s utopian community-orienting policing. There is a clear drawing of social boundaries, with members of the community treated one way and outsiders treated another way. “Trouble occur[s] usually when outsiders—from the North or California—[come] to town with nefarious schemes for bilking the citizens or introducing
some kind of modernizing plan” (Graham 158). These representations serve “to remind the audience of the normalcy of Mayberrians” and “to remind audience members that they (the audience) identify more with Mayberry” than the outsiders (Vaughn 408). In Mayberry, this distinction between insider versus outsider even applies to criminals. “Andy [runs] a family of Gypsies out of town when locals accuse them of having shady business practices. When outsiders [run] illegal liquor stills, Andy [goes] after them with the full power of the law, but when the ladies in the garden club had a still, he merely confiscate[s] it and let[s] them off with a warning” (Dobrin 24). The Darlings, who are from the mountains outside of Mayberry, are frequently represented as trouble makers. Although Andy enjoys playing music with the hillbilly family, this does not stop him from scheming on more than one occasion to get them out of town. The message is that the Darlings are too crude, too nutty, and too working class for even Mayberry.

Depending on where one stands in relation to this politics of belonging, Mayberry may represent a utopia for some working-class people and a dystopia for others. The dystopian qualities of Mayberry become clearer when looking at the town through the perspective of African Americans. In the 1960s, as network television shows increasingly sought to address race relations and add African Americans to regular casts, “Mayberry remained a southern town with no Black citizens” (O’Leary and Worland 81). The show shows a greater willingness to take on the issue of gender equality rather than racial equality, although it did not significantly challenge the representation of Mayberry working life in masculine terms (e.g., “Ellie for Council,” “Those Gossipin’ Men,” and “Aunt Bee the Crusader,”). As Graham notes, Andy Griffith was a “weekly testament to the ideal of minimal social change” and this was no more apparent than when examining the choice of Griffith and the show’s producers to exclude African Americans from the regular cast (158). Griffith says he regrets the decision, but explains that African Americans at the time did not want to be portrayed in servant roles and “there is no way in some small town in the South that white people were going to flock to a black doctor or lawyer” (Funk 1E). In Griffith’s attempt to “keep the show honest” to the working-class culture of the South (or at least as he saw it), he perpetrated a dishonesty toward African Americans. To find no significant place for African Americans in Mayberry is disturbing given the important role they play in America’s working-class history and how they represent a significant proportion of the South and North Carolina (over 20 percent of the state population).
There are just a handful of instances in which black actors appear as extras in *Andy Griffith* episodes, but they occupy the distant background of scenes or populate the speechless margins of the film frame. In 249 episodes, the lone exception to this pattern is the African American character, Flip Conroy (played by Rockne Tarkington), an ex-NFL star who volunteers to coach Opie’s football team. Fans cite the Conroy character as evidence against accusations of African American exclusion. It is worth noting, however, that the coach is treated in the episode more as a visiting celebrity rather than a resident, even though Conroy is supposedly from Mayberry. According to the episode, Conroy has returned to town to work in his father’s business. This back story element would imply that Mayberry does indeed have African Americans, although this fact does not come to light until 1967, seven years after the show premiered. Plus, one person cannot represent and does not constitute an entire community.

The invisibility of African Americans makes Mayberry a racialized place that works to normalize whiteness and creates a racially selective image of working people and small-town life. This normative order is perhaps interpreted by some white viewers as comforting, but it can be a distressing and marginalizing depiction for an African American viewing public who feel that they do not belong. For these African Americans, they might wonder how Mayberry came to exist as an all-white community and what this signaled about race relations in the quiet hamlet. It is impossible to interpret Mayberry, however imaginary it may be, without drawing on one’s real-life experiences and perceptions. For many African Americans, these perceptions are invariably conditioned by memories of racism. There is a history in the United States of “sundown towns,” communities that used warning signs, laws, and even violence to exclude African Americans and other minorities from their populations. The word “sundown” comes from the fact African Americans were not allowed to stay in these towns after dark if allowed to be present at all. Sundown towns were being established well into the late 1960s and the legacy of this practice, while now outlawed, continues to shape the racial exclusivity of certain communities (Loewen).

Of course, the lack of diversity in Mayberry has not gone uncontested. One of the most interesting examples is a 2008 Internet blog post titled “Why Come There Ain’t No Black People in Mayberry?” From the perspective of the author of this posting, the politics of racial representation in Mayberry is very much connected to a conservative white reaction to the black liberation struggle. She or he writes, “The Andy Griffith Show ran from 1960 to 1968, at the very height of the Civil Rights movement. For
millions of white Americans part of the appeal of the show was its nostal-
gic portrayal of an idyllic South, one without bus boycotts or sit-ins or indeed any black people at all” (Northwest History). Graham echoes this same point when she writes: “Mayberry was CBS’s prime-time challenge to its own evening newscast. Coming into living rooms in the ‘family’ hours following Walter Cronkite’s stories from Birmingham and Selma, it suggested a different kind of realism—one of selective memory, silences, and omissions” (160).

Much more intriguing about the aforementioned Internet post is the accompanying YouTube video entitled The Negro Zone. The video’s director, David Bright, carries out a creative and irreverent editing of public domain footage from Andy Griffith to address the question, “What would happen to an African American visitor to the fictional Southern town?” Reference to The Negro Zone, a parody of the famous Twilight Zone television series, is meant to capture how surreal it would have been to find an African American in Mayberry. Bright uses green screen technology to insert an African American stranger into scenes from the classic television show. He simulates Mayberry’s reaction to this stranger by dubbing audio, splicing together film footage taken from several episodes, and taking plot elements out of their original context.

When the stranger, a large African American man dressed in a dark suit, arrives by bus to Mayberry and announces his plans to stay in town, we are shown cutaway shots of Mayberrians with looks of horror and suspicion on their faces (including Aunt Bee). The African American visitor soon finds himself the target of a manhunt and is eventually chased from town at gunpoint. The stranger escapes to the outskirts of Mayberry, where he is found by Andy and Barney and then shot dead even after pleading to be allowed to leave town and asking, “Why can’t we all just get along?” One of the final scenes of the video shows a group of citizens assembled around a grave with Andy saying: “Well, it’s done to the satisfaction of everybody,” implying that the killing of the stranger is something the community wanted. The video is raw in quality and message, but it speaks to the competing ways that Mayberry can be interpreted in both utopian and dystopian terms. On screen, the town is paradise for white America but perhaps just another sundown town for black America.

This is not the only instance in which commentators have questioned the racial attitudes of Mayberry. African American columnist Elijah Gosier admits to liking Andy Griffith, but also the columnist wonders what would happen if Barney pulled him over and he appeared in Andy’s court to answer charges. Gosier writes: “Might I drive into Mayberry and never
be heard from again?” As he goes on to argue, there are “two different stan-
dards [that] define racism for white people and black people.” For those
who are not often threatened, such as whites, “racism has to be demon-
strated by word or deed” (Gosier, “Race” 1). For those who are victims of
racism, surviving relies on being suspicious, spotting danger early, and
looking for signals of potential discrimination. These comments are in-
structive to understanding how Mayberry can evoke distress from African
Americans even in the absence of overt racist practices. Gosier suggests that
racism can be much more subtle and he uses Mayberry in a broader way to
reflect on the race relations in central Florida area, where he lives. For him,
Mayberry is a metaphor for describing an approach to race relations that
may not carry out malicious discrimination but nevertheless “undervalues
the lives and work of black people” (Gosier, “Same Old” 1D). The end re-
sult, like the fictional North Carolina town, is a workplace in which African
Americans are less visible and prominent than they should be.

Mayberry as Off-Screen Utopia/Dystopia

As the above comments illustrate, the cultural power and politics of May-
berry has transcended mere entertainment and discussions of Andy Griffith
have moved beyond what is shown (or not shown) on the television screen.
In contrast to Gosier, other viewers represent the show as an important
moral guide in the larger world. Inspired by the idyllic image of Mayberry,
some fans have developed religious lessons. For instance, The Way Back
to Mayberry, a study guide for church groups, contains essays for about
30 episodes, with each essay beginning with a Bible verse illustrated by the
episode. Joey Fann, the book’s author, asserts that there are “lessons to be
gathered from Mayberry . . . real lessons about how ordinary people deal
with everyday life” (1). Fann’s words prompt us to realize that the distinc-
tion between “reel” and “real” is increasingly blurred and confl ated in the
postmodern world, where media representations heavily contextualize and
shape social perception and practice.

Underlying Fann’s book is not only the idea that Mayberry represents
a moral utopia for working people, but also a belief that America has lost
touch with a set of core values that run throughout the storylines of Andy
Griffith, hence the emphasis on finding “the way back to Mayberry.” Similar
to viewers in the 1960s, current fans display a nostalgic yearning for a time
and place that no longer exists—or never existed. The longing for May-
berry is often related to the “sense of place” that Andy Griffith creates as it
idealizes small-town, working-class community life. Sense of place refers
to the subjective meanings and values that people ascribe to places, which then influences the degree to which they feel attached to those places. Nostalgia is a powerful lens through which people see and identify with places. Mayberry has become an important part of our vocabulary, not just for describing the setting of *Andy Griffith* but also for recapturing a nostalgic sense of place in a broader sense, including within real-life communities.

This longing for the idyllic is perhaps best illustrated in Scott Dickson’s book, *In Search of Mayberry*. He argues that Mayberry “may not actually be 100% make-believe,” but it is possible for people “to find their own personal Mayberry” (ix). For Dickson, watching *Andy Griffith* reaffirms the value of living and working in small towns rather than big cities. He greatly emphasizes the feeling of being at home or belonging found in Mayberry and the fact that “there are dozens of beautiful little settlements in North Carolina that strongly resemble television’s favorite small town” (vii). This emphasis on belonging is poignant. Similar to the television images that Dickson admires so much, African Americans are absent from his photographs and descriptions of small towns, even though black people clearly inhabit these places.

A strong boosterism pervades Dickson’s book as he encourages readers to bring economic development to small towns by traveling to or living in them. The utopian image of Mayberry as a quaint, neighborly town is one that some place developers have sought to exploit. When the wearing of thongs emerged as a point of controversy in Kure Beach, North Carolina, the town council banned the revealing beach wear. In defending the action, the mayor said he wants to keep the area as close to “Mayberry with a beach” as possible (Anonymous A4). Making this comparison not only articulated a vision of conservative values, but communicated to potential vacationers an image of a family-friendly community. Creating a connection with Andy Griffith is not restricted to existing towns. In Moneta, Virginia, developers have created a residential community named Mayberry Hills, promising a traditional town feel (including front porches) and to bring the close friendly neighborhoods of the past back to life. However, as we observe with the “reel” Mayberry, this “real” Mayberry enacts a selective sense of place and definition of the ideal community. While developers claim they are providing affordable housing, home prices within the development suggest that Mayberry Hills, unlike its television namesake, will be a middle-class community rather than a working-class one.

Perhaps the best example of a town associating itself with the idyllic representations of Mayberry is Mount Airy, North Carolina, Griffith’s boyhood
home. The actor denies that his fictional Mayberry was based on Mount Airy; he and the writers of the show assert that Mayberry was a composite of several small southern towns. The name Mayberry probably comes from a town in Virginia where Griffith’s mother was born. The show’s Mount Pilot came about by reversing the name of Pilot Mountain, North Carolina. A diner called Snappy Lunch, which is mentioned in an early episode, has a real Mount Airy counterpart, where Griffith ate as a child (Kutzer). Today, much of Mount Airy’s identity revolves around Andy Griffith, to the extent that the town has a website that reads visitmayberry.com. At one point, there were even discussions among town leaders about formally renaming Mount Airy to Mayberry, although they decided against this.

References to Andy Griffith abound across Mount Airy’s landscape, which includes no fewer than 32 businesses that use Mayberry in their name (e.g., Mayberry Motor Inn, Mayberry Five & Dime, Mayberry Pharmacy) and other enterprises named for characters and places from the show (e.g., named Aunt Bea’s [sic] Barbeque, Opie’s Candystore, Floyd’s Barber Shop, Wally’s Service Station, Barney’s Cafe). Other attractions include the Andy Griffith Homeplace, Museum, and Playhouse and the Mayberry Squad Car Tour, which transports fans around Mount Airy in 1960s era police vehicles. In an attempt to revise a struggling economy, Mount Airy has hosted an annual “Mayberry Days” festival since 1990, attracting tens of thousands of visitors from across the region and the country. People visit the festival to purchase Andy Griffith memorabilia, meet surviving stars from the show, learn about Griffith’s history, and socialize with other fans. On a deeper level, they are also drawn to the festival by a sense of attachment to Mayberry as a simpler time and place, even if it is simply simulated in Mount Airy. Festival goers tend to be older, working-class people who are still avid watchers of the television show.

Local promoters and entrepreneurs use a variety of representational strategies to perpetuate a utopian view of Mayberry, and by extension, Mount Airy. However, as we find in analyzing the television representation of Mayberry, the depiction of Mount Airy as Mayberry is a utopia for some people while having dystopian repercussions for other people. This is particularly the case for African Americans living in the North Carolina community. The Mayberry Days festival celebration is attended almost exclusively by whites and there are few African Americans working in the downtown district that hosts Andy Griffith tourists. African Americans have expressed frustration with the marketing of Mount Airy as Mayberry given the portrayal of the town as having no black citizens (Turner). Mount Airy does have African American residents (8 percent of the 8,484 people
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in 2000), and some of them express concern that a celebration of Mayberry is not relatable to their culture and heritage. They also worry about a lack of job opportunities in the area. Since 1999, Mount Airy has lost over 3,100 jobs due to the closing of textile and apparel plants. The city’s unemployment rate remains well above the state average (Wiseman). Some African Americans we have spoken with contend that the energy and resources spent remaking Mount Airy into Mayberry can be devoted to better economic development strategies that benefit more citizens.

There can be multiple and potentially contradictory senses of place; some local African Americans assert that their history and social experiences in Mount Airy depart significantly from the way of life idealized in *Andy Griffith*. In 1963, at the height of the show’s popularity, Mount Airy police arrested 10 black youth for demanding service at two drug stores and refusing to leave. White city fathers blamed the demonstration on “outside pressure groups of NACCP commandos,” thus heightening public fear of the civil rights movement and characterizing local African Americans as pawns unable to think for themselves. In 1964, the editor of the *Mount Airy News* condemned efforts to ban the book “Little Black Sambo,” dismissing concerns that the text degraded the image of African Americans and accusing local black people of having a “deep feeling of insecurity.” In 1968, the last year of production for *Andy Griffith*, the Mount Airy YMCA finally opened its doors to African Americans, doing so in winter so as to avoid community reaction to the swimming of both races in the outdoor pool together (M. Curtis 1G).

Even today, Mount Airy shows signs of social tension uncharacteristic of the idyllic Mayberry. In the television community, everyone loved Andy. This is not necessarily the case in Mount Airy, where vandals defaced a TV Land–commissioned statue of Andy and Opie Taylor in 2010. The statue stands in front of the Andy Griffith Playhouse and displays the iconic image of Andy and Opie walking hand in hand with fishing rods. Andy’s hair was doused with green paint and his mouth and badge with red paint. Local authorities never found the culprit (Joyce, “Vandals”). Around the same time as the statue vandalism, Betty Lou Lynn was robbed of her wallet in a Mount Airy shopping center. Lynn appeared in *Andy Griffith*, playing Barney Fife’s longtime girlfriend, Thelma Lou. Ironically, Lynn moved to Mount Airy from Los Angeles in 2007 wishing to avoid the big-city crime of California (Joyce, “Thelma”). During the 2010 Mayberry Days festival, which celebrated the show’s fiftieth anniversary, a local businessman posted two signs accusing the city of being anti–small business and racist, citing the lack of African American cops in Mount Airy (Joyce, “Signs”).
In closing, Mayberry has become an important signifier in American popular culture, often represented in utopian and nostalgic terms both on screen and off-screen. Yet, this image of an ideal working-class community that values social cooperation, economic fairness, unpretentiousness, and compassion for the marginalized can also be interpreted in dystopian terms. Mayberry was depicted on film as an exclusive, all-white town in a time when African Americans were actively pushing for civil rights. The idea of an idyllic Mayberry has been appropriated and adapted by fans as they seek to re-create the show’s special sense of place in the real world—both for spiritual and economic reasons. Mount Airy is perhaps one of the most forceful expressions of this practice, but it also powerfully illustrates that the marketing of the city as Mayberry does not resonate with all local residents. Like the original television series, the representation of Mount Airy–Mayberry as a utopia holds the potential to marginalize African Americans from broader conceptions of the working class. It was a problematic exclusion when the show was produced in the 1960s and one that is especially disturbing in the post–civil rights era as many people continue to nostalgically long for Mayberry. The lesson we should take away is perhaps best captured by Mary Curtis, when she writes: "Nostalgia is fine. Enjoy Mayberry, just don’t mistake a southern fairy tale for the truth" (1G).

Works Cited


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