A Cuban in Mayberry

Looking Back at America's Hometown

Gustavo Pérez Firmat
A Cuban in Mayberry
For Jen and Chris Holloway
Tell me a story of deep delight.

ROBERT PENN WARREN
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A youngish man and a boy stroll along a dirt road. Barefoot, the boy is dressed in a T-shirt and rolled-up jeans. The man is wearing a law enforcement uniform—the badge is visible above the flap of the left shirt pocket—and boots. Fishing poles are slung over their shoulders. Since their figures cast only a slight shadow, it must be around midday. A simple, whistled tune plays in the background. The boy runs ahead and throws pebbles into a pond. When the man catches up, he takes the boy by the hand. From their ease with each other, it’s obvious that they know each other well. The sequence ends when they reach the edge of the pond and the boy flings one last pebble into the water.

Although this scene is scarcely twenty seconds long and more than half a century old, millions of Americans still recognize it today as the title sequence of *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960–1968), one of the most popular sitcoms in the history of American television. The man is Andy Taylor, sheriff of Mayberry, and the boy is his son, Opie. The pond is Myers Lake.

This rural setting, heightened by Earle Hagen’s catchy melody, begins to suggest what distinguishes *TAGS* (as aficionados call *The Andy Griffith Show*) from other sitcoms from the 1950s and 1960s. This is not the urban world of *I Love Lucy* and *Make Room for Daddy* or the suburban world of *Father Knows Best, Leave It to Beaver*, and *The Donna Reed Show*. One establishing shot of *Father Knows Best* shows Robert Young walking into a large and well-appointed house, where he is greeted by his wife and children. The briefcase hanging from his arm conveys that he has a white-collar job. Another shows him by the front door looking at his watch, as he waits for his wife to bring him his hat and his briefcase. The title sequence for the second season of *Leave It to Beaver* shows Wally and Beaver rushing down the stairs, at the bottom of which their mother waits, lunch bag and box in hand. The following season, the episodes begin...
with Ward and June Cleaver coming into the boys’ room to wake them up for school. Other opening sequences show June Cleaver outside the door, ready to give the boys their lunches and jackets, or coming out of the house carrying a tray with pitcher and glasses while her husband and sons tend to the front yard. The Donna Reed Show opens with Donna coming down the stairs in the morning and answering the phone. She is followed by her two children and her husband. She hands the kids their lunches, and her husband his briefcase, and gets a peck on the lips as he rushes out the door.

These scenes portray a family unit composed of two or more children, a mother who is the heart of the household, and a father who brings home the bacon (in a briefcase). In the opening of TAGS, nothing suggests labor or domesticity. Even though the show is usually lumped together with other “affable family comedies,” TAGS focuses on the father-son dyad, the minimal unit of community, rather than on the nuclear family. For sure, this is not the only TV show of the 1960s focused on a widower. The long-running My Three Sons, which debuted the same year as TAGS, did likewise, as did The Courtship of Eddie’s Father, some years later. But TAGS is the first sitcom to feature a single father and an only son, and to suggest by the two-shot title sequence that they constitute an autonomous unit. (To make this point in a different way, Griffith insisted that the first episode of each season deal with Andy and Opie’s relationship.) Like other sitcoms, TAGS will also have a domestic component, but the viewer gets no inkling of this from the initial images, which show Andy and Opie Taylor off in the woods by themselves. Absent is the wife and mother who stands by the door with lunch box and briefcase. Absent also is any suggestion that father and son are leaving for work or school. On the contrary, it seems that Andy and Opie are taking time off. The easy pace at which they are walking tells the viewer that they don’t have a care in the world. And instead of briefcases and books, they carry fishing poles. It’s clear that this slice of Americana has less to do with the ethic of hard work than with the enjoyment of leisure.

Another of the title sequences of Leave It to Beaver shows the Cleavers emerging from their house in the morning. Since Ward Cleaver is carrying a thermos jug and Mrs. Cleaver a picnic basket, we can assume that he is not going to work. And yet they all rush into their late-model sedan. Andy and Opie would not understand their hurry or the necessity to drive to their destination. The Cleaver home, as well as the shiny car sitting in the driveway, situates the show in 1950s suburban America. The opening scene of TAGS is more difficult to place. Andy’s uniform is generic; Opie’s T-shirt and jeans are even less datable. The vagueness of temporal reference hints that TAGS will tap into areas of cultural identification older and deeper than those evoked in other family shows. There’s something of Walden here, as there is of Tom Sawyer. If not exactly an errand into the wilderness, Andy and Opie’s outing to Myers Lake suggests
breaking away, playing hooky. If Andy is dressed for work, why is he not working? If Opie is dressed as he would be for school (minus the sneakers), why is he not in school?

Vague about the time frame, the opening sequence is no more precise about the whereabouts. The foliage is indistinct; the pine trees in the background could be almost anywhere in America. But Andy is wearing his uniform, so we can assume that he works somewhere nearby. That somewhere is Mayberry, a fictional town in the North Carolina foothills based on Mount Airy, North Carolina, where Andy Griffith was born and raised. Mayberry is the quintessential small town, the kind of place where everyone is kith or kin and life’s troubles are brief, comic, and solvable—and also the kind of place that sets TAGS apart from other rural sitcoms. Successful shows like Petticoat Junction and Green Acres also extolled the virtues and exposed the follies of small towns. If TAGS was a “rubecom,” so were The Real McCoys—which started the genre—and The Beverly Hillbillies. But The Real McCoys and The Beverly Hillbillies extracted hillbillies from their natural habitat—West Virginia and Tennessee—and plopped them down in California; and neither Green Acres nor Petticoat Junction did much to make Hooterville more than a gag site: the village of hoots and hooters.

In TV land, perhaps only Cheers, named after the bar “where everybody knows your name,” has exploited as effectively the spirit of place and sense of community. But nobody actually lives in Sam’s bar, even if it sometimes seems that Cliff and Norm are glued to their stools. In TAGS we see the locals not only relaxing after work but also going about their daily business. And although Cheers takes place in Boston, every city has a neighborhood bar like the one in the show. Mayberry has to be in the rural South, and, more particularly, in the Piedmont. As often happens with Southern fictions, place is crucial. And not only because the speech of many of the characters would be incongruous anywhere else, but because TAGS derives meaning from location. The implicit premise is that what happens in Mayberry does not happen anywhere else. As the episodes stress repeatedly, the townsfolk’s ways are unique to this Southern town, population 1,800 (coincidentally the same number as that of another fictional town, Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg).

In the course of the series, hundreds of Mayberrians appear on the screen or are spoken of, but the episodes revolve around a select group of worthies. In addition to Andy and Opie, the regulars or semiregulars include Andy’s Aunt Bee, who looks after her nephew and his son; Barney Fife, the reliably unreliable deputy; Floyd Lawson, owner of the “best clip joint” (barbershop) in town; Otis Campbell, an amiable dipsomaniac who locks himself in jail every Friday and Saturday evening; Gomer Pyle, the gas jockey with the tenor voice; a couple of irksome mayors, Pike and Stoner; a preacher, Reverend Tucker of
All Souls Church; merchants like Ben Weaver of Weaver’s Department Store and Orville Monroe, a mortician who doubles as TV repairman; Helen Crump, Andy’s girl; Thelma Lou, Barney’s girl; Skippy and Daphne, the “Fun Girls,” demimondaines from nearby Mt. Pilot who compete for Andy and Barney’s attention; Malcolm Merriweather, an English tourist and the only outsider who makes repeated visits to Mayberry; and a passel of farmers and hillbillies, among them Rafe Hollister, the Darling clan, and the indomitable Ernest T. Bass, rhymer and rock thrower extraordinaire.

During the show’s eight seasons there was considerable turnover in the cast. After the fifth season, Don Knotts (Barney Fife) left to pursue a movie career. Gomer (Jim Nabors) and Floyd (Howard McNear) were written out. Nabors went on to star in Gomer Pyle U.S.M.C., and McNear became too ill to perform. As these actors left, new characters were added: Warren Ferguson (Jack Burns), Barney’s short-lived replacement; Goober Pyle (George Lindsey), Gomer’s cousin and successor at Wally’s Service; Howard Sprague (Jack Dodson), the nerdy county clerk; and Emmett Clark (Paul Hartman), whose Fix-It Shop takes over the locale of Floyd’s barbershop. After the eighth season Andy Griffith and Ron Howard called it quits. When the show resurfaced the next season as Mayberry R.F.D., another widower and his son, Sam Jones (Ken Berry) and Mike (Buddy Foster, Jodie’s brother), took over from Andy and Opie. Of the original characters, only Aunt Bee was left. By the time Mayberry R.F.D. went off the air three years later, none of the original characters lived in Mayberry, since Aunt Bee had been written out at the end of the second season. Yet in its last season, The Andy Griffith Show’s offspring still ranked among the top fifteen programs on television. In contrast to almost every other sitcom then or now, the appeal of TAGS and Mayberry R.F.D. had more to do with the setting than with any particular character or group of characters. People came and went, but Mayberry remained.

In 1964 the show’s popularity led CBS to begin rerunning TAGS on weekday mornings; to differentiate between the daily reruns and the weekly shows, the former were retitled Andy of Mayberry. Griffith recognized that the town was, by design, “as much a character on the show as Sheriff Andy Taylor.” Move Andy and Opie to the San Fernando Valley, as in The Real McCoys, or Los Angeles, as in The Beverly Hillbillies, and the show would not have survived the relocation. Embodiments of the genius of the place, the townsfolk belong to Mayberry as much as the town belongs to them. A case in point: Barney Fife, who leaves to work for the police department in Raleigh. Away from Mayberry, Barney is a fish out of water, much like Gomer Pyle in the Marines or Old Sam, the legendary silver carp from Tucker’s Lake, when it is moved to an aquarium.

Early in the first season, “Stranger in Town” (episode 1.12) introduced a New Yorker who, having heard so many good things about Mayberry, intends to
adopt it as his hometown. The stranger, Ed Sawyer, knows as much about Mayberry as any of the natives. He can tell apart the Buntley twins. He remembers that it was in room 209 of the Mayberry Hotel where Wilbur Hennessey got drunk and fell out the window. He knows about Floyd’s rheumatism, which sometimes prevents him from indulging his hobby of tossing horseshoes. He is in love with Lucy Matthews, though he has never seen her. He even knows that Sarah, the switchboard operator, takes a pinch of snuff now and then. Some of the townsfolk think he’s a foreign agent; others believe that he comes from another planet.

But Ed Sawyer’s intimate knowledge of the town’s everyday life derives from causes less exotic. While in the armed forces, he struck up a friendship with Joe Larson, a Mayberrian who talked about his hometown all the time. By the time Ed left the service, he was so enamored of the town that he subscribed to the *Mayberry Gazette* to keep up with local doings, and as soon as he was able, he moved to Mayberry. When Andy asks him how he knows he is going to be happy in Mayberry, Sawyer replies: “Mayberry is my hometown.” Ed Sawyer represents *TAGS* viewers, Mayberrians by choice rather than birth. The remarkable thing, however, is that “Stranger in Town” was filmed in September 1960, before a single episode of *TAGS* had been broadcast. By the time it aired, in December, Griffith had been proved prescient, for Mayberry was already on the way to becoming America’s favorite hometown.

In the following week’s episode, “Mayberry Goes Hollywood,” a movie producer shows up in town. He too has been captivated by the relaxed and simple ways of Mayberry. Suspicious of outsiders, the locals initially fear that the movie will make fun of how they talk and look. Once the producer reassures them, they agree to let him proceed with his project; but the prospect of being in the movies induces the locals to act up. Barney dons a new uniform that makes him look like a member of the Canadian Mounties. The barbershop is rebranded a “Tonsorial Parlor” and the Bluebird Diner the “Cinemascope Café.” Orville’s mortuary starts advertising “Hollywood Funerals.” Even the old geezers who sit in front of the courthouse get “gussied up” with suits and ties. The producer is dismayed: “What’s gotten into you people? What have you done to the town, and to yourselves? This isn’t the Mayberry I wanted to photograph. I could have built a set like this in Hollywood.” Chastised, Mayberrians revert to their old ways, which were odd enough. As the episode ends, the producer reiterates his intention of making a movie about Mayberry. His movie, divided into 249 segments, is *TAGS*, a convincing fiction of unscripted life.

Mayberry is a far more compelling fictional locale than Hooterville or, for that matter, the Hilldale of *The Donna Reed Show*, the Springfield of *Father Knows Best*, and other similar fields and dales. Seemingly a placid backwater, the town contains (and fails to contain) undercurrents that complicate the town’s
way of life. The townspeople’s view of the rest of the country, to the extent that they have one, is conflicted to the point of incoherence. Their hostility to outsiders belies the friendliness they advertise. Their insistence on town traditions, particularly Founder’s Day, betrays worry about their continuance, worry that arises from the ever-present threat of invasion by outsiders, raids that the townsfolk are hard-pressed to rebuff. There’s more to this paradise than meets the viewer’s eye. The charm, simplicity, and sunny disposition of Mayberrians make it easy to overlook the occasional darkness of tags. Mayberry is a paradise, but an anxious one, Arcadia under siege. Floyd is right that Mayberry is “the garden city of the state,” but there are serpents in the garden.

In fact, Mayberry is doomed. Several late episodes make clear that the sleepy Southern town with the oddball characters and quaint customs is undergoing a quiet revolution. Barney, the most unforgettable of the many memorable characters in the show, once said he had a clock in his stomach, a trait that he inherited from his mother. When Barney’s clock strikes midnight, Mayberry will disappear, taking him with it. The new day will bring forth the town of Mayberry R.F.D., a progressive, New South community that, for better and worse, bears little resemblance to the Mayberry of old. According to Griffith, tags was superior to other rubecoms because the humor relied less on jokes than on character, but tags also stands out because of the complexity of its fictional world, which sinks its roots into Southern history, and specifically into the South’s legacy of loss. As we will see, old-time Mayberrians reject the New South because, to them, the New South is a Northern South, and hence no South at all. Barney also believed that “your true schizophrenics” are the ones who don’t look it. What applies to the deranged applies to Barney’s hometown: superficially placid but in distress.

The Andy Griffith Show premiered on CBS on October 3, 1960, at 9:30 in the evening, following The Danny Thomas Show. It remained on Monday night for the rest of its run, the last show airing on April 1, 1968. For all of its eight seasons, tags ranked among the top seven programs on television. Every Monday night millions of viewers in all parts of America dropped in on Mayberry, among them such unlikely fans as Gipsy Rose Lee and Frank Sinatra. When Griffith called it quits as Sheriff Andy, tags was number one in the ratings, one of only three shows—the others being I Love Lucy and Seinfeld—to have accomplished the rare feat of going out on top. After 1968, tags continued its life in reruns on local stations. With the arrival of cable networks, the show found a home on TBS (Ted Turner is a lifelong tags fan) and later on Nickelodeon’s Nick at Nite and TV Land, where it remains one of the network’s most popular shows. During tags’s last season on CBS, it had a weekly audience of about fifteen and a half million viewers. In 1998 the Chris-
tian Science Monitor estimated that every day about five million people watched *TAGS* reruns on more than one hundred television stations across the country. More than ten years later, *TAGS* is still syndicated in almost one hundred local TV markets. In Roanoke, Virginia, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* ended its spectacular twenty-five-year run without ever beating reruns of *TAGS*.

When *TAGS* commemorated its fiftieth anniversary in 2010, the milestone was duly observed by the *TAGS* community with a telethon on TV Land, a festival in Mount Airy, and the maiden race of the “Andy Griffith” stock car at the Banking 500 in Charlotte (“Andy” finished 31st). Websites devoted to the show abound. One of them, The Andy Griffith Show Rerun Watchers Club (tagsrwc.com), originally a fan club founded at Vanderbilt University in 1979, has grown to more than twenty thousand members and over a thousand local chapters with such names as All Us Fifes Are Sensitive; Pipe Down, Otis; Aunt Bee’s Pickles; Briscoe’s Jug; and Ernest T. Bass Window Removers. At the virtual franchise of Mayberry’s own Weaver’s Department Store, fans can purchase T-shirts, calendars, mouse pads, board games (*Mayberry-opoly*), greeting cards, and bumper stickers (“This Sure Ain’t Mayberry”). Ever since its publication in 1991, *Aunt Bee’s Mayberry Cookbook* has sold more than a million copies. Its success spawned several sequels: *Postcards from Aunt Bee’s Cookbook* (1993), *Aunt Bee’s Delightful Desserts* (1996), *The Best of Mayberry* (1996), and *Aunt Bee’s Mealtime in Mayberry* (1999). Offering thirty-two different “fixin’s,” Mayberry’s Finest, a line of canned foods, made its debut in stores throughout the South in 2007. The Mayberry Ice Cream Restaurants, a chain of soup and sandwich shops, have existed in North Carolina since 1969.

It’s not only fixin’s, but food for the soul, that Mayberry has to offer. During the last fifteen years, a small cottage industry has developed around the teachings of the show’s episodes. *Life Lessons from Mayberry* (1997), by John and Len Oszustowicz, “captures the message of Mayberry and offers it in a down-home style as warm and relaxed as Andy’s front porch.” Religious groups and individuals have also used the homespun homilies in *TAGS* as an accessible vehicle for the dissemination of Christian doctrine. In *The Way Back to Mayberry* (2001) Joey Fann examines the show “in the light of Biblical truth.” Sunday school and Bible classes have available to them several study guides based on *TAGS*: *The Andy Griffith Show: Bible Study Series* (2000), *The Mayberry Bible Study* (2002), and *Mayberry Moments* (2008). In *The Mayberry Bible Study*, the episode in which Andy lets Malcolm Merriweather work off a debt he can’t pay dramatizes the biblical principle of service, as set out in the Gospels. The episode in which Barney fills the courthouse with dogs, another “primetime parable,” demonstrates that in Mayberry the quality of mercy is not strained.

When *TAGS* came on the air, the highest rated show in its time slot was *Adventures in Paradise*, an ABC offering about the captain of a schooner in the
South Seas. James Michener’s brainchild, *Adventures in Paradise* drew its appeal from the exotic settings and the handsome star, Gardner McKay. No sooner would Adam Troy, the dreamboat of the *Tiki III*, sail to Hong Kong to rescue a kidnapped damsel than he would be trolling the Pitcairn Islands looking for a black pearl. Inhabited by landlubbers rather than seadogs, Mayberry was an entirely different kind of paradise. Mayberrians’ idea of a south sea is Myers Lake. To satisfy their taste for adventure, they dine on pounded steak at Morelli’s or travel to the Chinese restaurant in Mt. Pilot. Insensible to the romance of the road, Mayberrians have little desire to go anywhere but where they have already been. Their fantasies are all déjà vu. Adam Troy and Andy Taylor may be young, good-looking, and share the same initials, but that’s where the resemblance ends. Until he spends a few days in Hollywood in a couple of episodes from the sixth season, Andy has never been farther from his hometown than Fayetteville, North Carolina. When the producers ordered six scripts that took the principal characters to Rome, Paris, and London, Griffith nixed them because he felt that they didn’t fit the show.6

The other show opposite TAGS on Monday nights was NBC’s *Dante*, whose title referred to the ex-con owner of a nightclub in San Francisco called—you guessed it—Dante’s Inferno. TAGS found itself in the position of competing with both paradise and inferno. No matter. In 1961 TV watchers were no more interested in one than in the other. Neither noir stories in gritty San Francisco nor romance in far-flung island settings could match the cornball charisma of Mayberry. The debut episode of TAGS easily outdrew both shows. As the weeks went on, the disparity in ratings increased. *Dante* was cancelled at the end of the season. *Adventures in Paradise* would hang on, in a different time slot, until 1962. In the following seven seasons, TAGS would continue to dominate its competition, which ran the gamut of TV genres: comedies, Westerns, crime shows, variety shows. During the 1964–1965 season, TAGS was up against a short-lived remake of *No Time for Sergeants*, the play and movie that had launched Andy Griffith’s rise to stardom in the 1950s. In 1967–1968 the competition was Danny Thomas, at the time the host of a variety show on NBC, *The Danny Thomas Hour*, who years earlier had introduced Mayberry to the world in an episode of *The Danny Thomas Show* (a.k.a. *Make Room for Daddy*). Neither one had better luck than *Dante*.

From the critics TAGS received mixed reviews. Describing the first episode as “warm, human, comical, and for a change, tastefully dramatic,” the Chicago Daily Tribune thought that the show would be a hit. The Philadelphia Inquirer also predicted that TAGS “would be a good bet for laughs and longevity.” But other reactions, particularly from the New York press, ranged from the lukewarm to the hostile. The New York Times remarked that the show was “only mildly entertaining.” The New York Journal American agreed, calling TAGS “a
friendly, shaggy-comedy study in the obvious which doesn’t offend, and—for Andy Griffith fans—may amuse.” Variety chimed in that the show might hold its own provided it didn’t overdo “the molasses to the detriment of the comedy.” The Newark Evening News considered T A G S a “dull” but “acceptable” addition to the cbs lineup. According to the New York Herald Tribune, the show was “trite, tedious and unimaginative.” Syndicated columnist Fred Danzig piled on by observing that T A G S’s allure was easy to resist, since Griffith’s manner was copied from Tennessee Ernie Ford, his smile from Bert Parks, and the dialogue came straight out of Lassie. A few years later, once T A G S was firmly entrenched, Variety remarked that its popularity “plain defies rational analysis, even allowing for the rube taste in TV literature.” It did concede that Andy Griffith “makes a hick almost likeable.” During its eight-year run, T A G S was nominated twice for an Emmy, not winning either time. By contrast, The Dick Van Dyke Show, on the air during five of those years, won three Emmys for best comedy series.

Surprisingly, perhaps, few of T A G S’s principals had any connection with the South. Sheldon Leonard, the executive producer, had made his name initially by playing heavies in 1940s movies like Week-End in Havana and had gone on to become a successful director and producer. Neither Aaron Ruben, the producer for the first five seasons, nor Bob Ross, who produced the last three seasons, nor the writers who contributed many of the finest scripts—Charles Stewart and Jack Elinson, Bill Idelson and Sam Bobrick, Everett Greenbaum and Jim Fritzell—were Southerners. Greenbaum, a Buffalo native, came up with the “hick” characters: Ernest T. Bass, the Darlings, and Gomer Pyle. (He and Fritzell had a knack for writing what Greenbaum called “odd ducks”; they got their start as a team working on Wally Cox’s Mister Peepers.) Howard Morris, who portrayed Ernest T. and directed several episodes, was a native New Yorker who had appeared on Sid Caesar’s Your Show of Shows. Some of the actors, like Griffith, did hail from the South: Don Knotts from Morgantown, West Virginia; Jim Nabors from Sylacauga, Alabama; and George Lindsey from Jasper, Alabama. Frances Bavier (Aunt Bee), a stage actor from New York, began her career playing ingenue parts on Broadway. Ron Howard was born in Oklahoma. Howard McNear was a lifelong Californian. Like her character, Helen Crump, Aneta Corsaut was a Kansan.

Andy Griffith often praised the genius of the writers for being able to capture the “feeling of North Carolina without ever being there.” But the lifeliness of the portrayal derived in no small part from Griffith’s attention to every aspect of the show, from the plots to the speech and names of the characters to the toponymy of Mayberry County. T A G S is not only The Andy Griffith Show but Andy Griffith’s show. It’s an auteur sitcom, to use a concept not often applied to television, and Griffith is the auteur. Although the initial idea for the series—Griffith as the sheriff of a Southern town—was Leonard’s, Griffith