

Considering Contemporary Television's Ideological Power

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I'd like to talk briefly about the recent phenomenon of Alaska-based reality television. On its face, this rash of programming—numbering in the dozens since roughly 2010—appears to exemplify many of the deleterious sociocultural shifts signaled by the popularization of reality television and neoliberalism writ large. Recurring narratives of resourceful individuals rejecting the social safety net in favor of self-reliance serve to further normalize neoliberalism as cultural ethos and social policy. These pioneer figures and the frameworks employed by producers also display the retrenchment of settler colonial mythologies of the frontier. On its face, this type of programming seems to present yet another form of extraction imposed upon Alaska, a region defined by contentious colonial struggles over natural and cultural resources that continue through to the present. Moreover, the timing of this explosion in programming on the heels of both President Obama's election and the 2008 financial crisis suggests a televisual suturing of regressive ideological power to this otherwise remote part of the country. As apparent as this may seem, I want to offer some observations and questions that I hope may broaden our ideological analysis to see the quandaries and contradictions this evident framing cannot contain.

On a recent research trip to Alaska, I explored state archives and conducted interviews to try to better understand the conditions that produce and characterize Alaskan media culture. It is a media culture, after all, that remains largely unknown to those outside the state. It is a culture that I suspected was not making its way into the reality television shows broadcast to audiences in what Alaskans call the "Lower 48" or "South 48." The producers and subjects I spoke with confirmed this, yet our conversations revealed Alaskans' relationships with these programs to be more complicated than most were willing/able to admit and more than I initially recognized.

The intimate community of people I spoke to—most of whom characterized Alaska as "a big state that feels like a small town"—were quick to dismiss as "inaccurate" the reality television productions dominating the likes of the Discovery Channel. As fast as they were to dispute the veracity of these programs, however, most also claimed an "Alaskan" mentality of self-sufficiency and anti-federal government sentiment indistinct from those triumphed by the very programs they had just discounted. Regardless of political identity, the majority of Alaska media producers and ancillary figures I spoke with seemed to invoke "accuracy" to express less a desire for greater representational precision and more a dissatisfaction with their lack of representational power compared to the culture industries of the South 48. In other words, "extraction" itself was not so much the issue (many suggested extraction was vital to the state's survival); rather it was the ongoing imbalance in cultural production that left Alaskans on the outside looking in at their own mediated state. The ideologies of Alaska-based reality TV and

Alaskans I interviewed overlapped much more than I thought, but the state's geographic distance from the Lower 48 and its lagging commercial telecommunications infrastructure—historically the infrastructure has been largely constructed and operated by the US military—seems to have compartmentalized this synonymy and instead imbued Alaska media culture with an outsider's ethos.

I anticipate this characteristic of Alaskan media culture will become even more complicated on future research trips that will take me away from the state's hub (Anchorage) to more rural regional centers like Bethel where media production is bilingual, more attentive to Alaska Native representations, and perhaps less wedded to colonial ideologies. It remains to be seen how Alaska and Alaskans will insert themselves and their ideologies into mainstream American television venues. An Alaskan state production tax incentive program was terminated prematurely due to a lack of external investment in local media, the unintended proliferation of non-Alaskan reality productions about the state, and an increasingly dire fiscal situation owing to the state's oil-based mono-economy (roughly 90% of state revenues come from taxes on extraction). Originally intended, according to the person tasked with promoting it to Hollywood, with growing a local media industry to diversify the state's economy and provide Alaskans a measure of representational sovereignty, the failure of this program and the contradictions in criticisms of reality TV raise questions about what ideologically is at stake for Alaskans in these shows.