

“A Friendly Desert Community”:

Queering Welcome to Night Vale

Laura B. Kellough-Pollock

University of Victoria

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Dr. David Miller

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Although not the mainstream approach to examining literature and media, queer analyses are a critical and insightful practice. In this paper, I will present a queer analysis of the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* (Fink & Cranor, 2012-present). First, I will provide a brief description of the podcast. Then, I will discuss three themes of queerness that emerge in the show – specifically, (1) the (homo)sexuality of the main character and his voice actor; (2) the strangeness and absurdity that is framed as the normal; and (3) the resilience of the citizens of Night Vale that parallels the resilience of LGBTQ people. As discussed in class, engaging in a queer analysis enables a more complex and nuanced understanding of a piece of media. By performing a queer analysis of *Welcome to Night Vale*, I aim to reveal the less explicit themes that underlie the podcast.

Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor's podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-present) acts as a fictional community radio station for the small desert American town of Night Vale. With his smooth, theatrical voice, radio host Cecil Palmer reports to his listeners the strange, often horrific (albeit amusing), events of Night Vale. The podcast is a mix of supernatural and Orwellian horror: There are no limits to what can happen in Night Vale, despite its oppressive municipal government and police. City Council, the Sheriff's Secret Police, and agents from a Vague Yet Menacing Government Agency all work together to control the people of Night Vale – including what citizens are 'allowed' to think and know.

The first queer theme is obvious, but it is nonetheless a crucial aspect of the queerness of the podcast: the main character, Cecil, is a gay man. The first indication of Cecil's sexuality appears in the Pilot episode, when Carlos, a scientist, comes to Night Vale to study the strange happenings of the "scientifically interesting community" (Fink & Cranor, 2012c). It is clear that

Cecil is immediately attracted to Carlos, stating that “[Carlos] grinned, and everything about him was perfect, and I fell in love instantly” (Fink & Cranor, 2012c). Cecil’s relationship with Carlos develops slowly and in bits and pieces. For a while, Carlos is only mentioned in conjunction with his scientific studies – but the admiration Cecil has for him is clear in Cecil’s news reports. Eventually, Cecil and Carlos start dating, and they end up getting married and adopting a child together.

In addition, it is important to note that Cecil Baldwin, the actor who voices Cecil, is gay himself. In fact, the decision to write the fictional character Cecil as queer was influenced by Baldwin. In an interview, Baldwin described how he had sensed the queerness of his character (see Stevens, 2017). Noticing Cecil’s emphasis on Carlos’ physical appearance, with his elaborate descriptions of Carlos’ “perfect hair” and “teeth like a military cemetery” (Fink & Cranor, 2012c), Baldwin determined that his character was attracted to Carlos, and he decided to go along with it (see Stevens, 2017). While a character or actor’s sexuality may seem irrelevant (and perhaps could be, if we lived in a world without homophobia and patriarchy), it is nevertheless encouraging to see positive queer representation.

The second queer theme of the podcast is its strangeness. Co-creator Joseph Fink describes the podcast as a “sort of ‘weird’ fiction” and places it within the genre of “magical realism” (Pichardo, n.d.). On the surface, Night Vale is just like any other small town – except supernatural beings and events are commonplace. For instance, there is Khoshekh the cat, who permanently hovers over the sink in the men’s washroom at the radio station, unable to move from his ‘hoverspot.’ In one episode, Cecil reports that “Old Woman Josie...says the Angels revealed themselves to her. Said they were ten feet tall, radiant, one of them was black. Said

they helped her with various household chores” (Fink & Cranor, 2012c). The existence of hovering cats and helpful angels are never questioned, and reports of second heads, a five-headed dragon that runs for office, and a glow cloud that drops animal carcasses from the sky are all normal occurrences for Night Vale.

As discussed in lectures, ‘queer’ can be understood as the odd, the strange, the non-normative, and that which is fundamentally opposed to the normal (see Miller, 2021). Thus, the strangeness of Night Vale can be read as queer, as the podcast disrupts expectations and does not conform to the normative. Moreover, because of the supernaturalism, the usual constraints of time and science do not exist in Night Vale. Consequently, anything can happen, and anyone can be anyone (see Wu, 2014). In other words, the weirdness of Night Vale allows space for those who don’t fit in with the normative – such as queer people.

The third queer theme can be understood as the relationship between oppression, resilience, and queerness. As I have mentioned, Night Vale is run by an oppressive regime. For instance, in his news report of a press conference, Cecil describes how “the Sheriff’s Secret Police then ethically kettled the pool of reporters, gently coercing them with pepper spray. Most were taken away peacefully in handcuffs and black hoods” (Fink & Cranor, 2012a). He says this matter-of-factly, and it is evident that this is just a typical day in Night Vale. In another report, Cecil mentions “the abandoned mine shaft outside of town where people who vote incorrectly are taken by the Secret Police” and that “the Secret Police announced they will be randomly executing one prisoner a day until all incorrect votes are corrected” (Fink & Cranor, 2012b). Despite the controlling and volatile regime, the people of Night Vale seem happy and proud to live in their town. This unrelenting endurance indicates that the citizens of Night Vale

are highly resilient people. I would argue that this resilience reflects the resilience of LGBTQ people, who constantly face heterosexism, discrimination, marginalization, and stigmatization. The podcast can be interpreted as one of survival and resilience, and the strength of the citizens of Night Vale parallels the strength of queer people.

Finally, while Night Vale is under an oppressive regime, it is an *absurdist* oppressive regime. Namely, the laws and prohibitions are mostly nonsensical and random – such as the mandatory weekly meal at Big Rico’s Pizza, the compulsory journal subscriptions, the ban on wheat and wheat by-products, and the outlawing of pocket calculators. Notably, the regime does not seek to control or criminalize LGBTQ identities, nor does it impose sexist, misogynist, patriarchal laws and expectations on women. Perhaps the creators of the podcast are suggesting that the patriarchal, misogynist, homophobic, and transphobic regimes, systems, movements, and ideologies of our society *are* absurd, and are not so different from the oppressive regime of Night Vale. In both cases, it is about power, and not the content or focus of their laws.

In this paper, I have illustrated how a piece of media can be read ‘queerly’. Specifically, I have used a queer lens to examine the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* and highlighted three themes of queerness. First, I discussed the (homo)sexuality of both Cecil the fictional character and Cecil the actor. Second, I explained how the weirdness of the podcast can be interpreted as queer. Third, I explored the relationship between oppression, queerness, and resilience by examining how the resilience of the people of Night Vale mirrors the resilience of LGBTQ people. Ultimately, I have demonstrated how employing a queer lens can provide a fuller and richer understanding of a piece of media.

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