

Small town secession: Representations of micro-statehood in the US TV series *Republic of Sarah* (2021)

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ABSTRACT: The 13-part US TV series *Republic of Sarah* (2021) represents the emergence of Greylock, a microstate on the US/Canada border. The establishment of the microstate is initially represented as a tactical ploy by opponents of a mining enterprise that capitalises on a (fictional) error made when the international boundary between the US and Canada was drawn up in the 1840s. This premise allows the series to explore the practical difficulties in establishing a microstate in the early 21st Century. But the radical autonomist aspect of this theme is undercut by the new state's close adherence to ideals of US participatory democracy and the manner in which Greylock is presented as a more humane and participatory alternative to contemporary America. Following an overview of secessionist movements in the US and the legal structures that have prevented them gaining traction, the article provides an overview of the issues presented in *Republic of Sarah*, the impulses behind its production and aspects of its critical reception.

Keywords: Canada, microstate, micronationality, television, *Republic of Sarah*, secession, USA

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Introduction

Republic of Sarah (henceforth *RoS*) is a 13-episode TV series made for the US CW network and first broadcast and made available on various international streaming platforms in 2021. Set in the fictional New Hampshire town of Greylock (population: around 2500), located on a river island on the Canadian border, *RoS*'s scenario involves the town declaring independence from the US in protest about rights granted to a company to mine a valuable mineral lying directly underneath it. A group of residents promote the secession after uncovering historical documents that identify Greylock being located on a patch of land on a river between the US and Canada that was not assigned to either country when the Webster-Ashburton border treaty was concluded between the US and Britain in 1842. Such an omission is credible, given both the meandering nature of rivers on certain terrains, and the nature of other anomalies on the US-Canada border. These include: the Northwest Angle, a US exclave in Manitoba (population: around 60) (Froese, 2019); and Point Roberts (population: 1,110), a US peninsula on the northeast side of the Strait of Georgia, attached to mainland Canada (Beylier, 2021) that has faced serious problems of mobility and logistics in recent pandemic times (Little, 2021).

The secessionists' claim is found to have merits and the series concerns the community's attempts to design the governance mechanisms of their newly independent homeland and respond to US attempts to undermine it. The series draws on the similar but distinct concepts of micronationality and microstatehood. Micronations are largely notional entities that are claimed by individuals or

small groups and are rarely afforded recognition by established states or by international bodies such as the United Nations (UN). A number of these entities have originated in response to grievances about local or central government planning decisions, such as Wy, in Sydney, Australia (History of Sydney, 2019) and the Republic of Kugelmugel, in Vienna, Austria (Greyscape, 2021). *RoS* also follows another pattern in attempted micronational secessions, where nostalgia for an imagined better (usually pre-modern/ pre-lapsarian) past motivates separation from the present-day parent country in order to revive the notionally lost elements in micro format, such as with regard to autonomy activism on the Isle of Wight, UK (Grydehøj & Hayward, 2011), and Pontinha, in Madeira, Portugal (Bicudo de Castro & Hayward, 2021). However, while *RoS* invites comparison to micronational narratives, the (begrudging) recognition of Greylock as a separate entity by the US and Canada in the series more precisely identifies Greylock as an emergent, very small (or micro) state alongside existing small sovereign entities as diverse as Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco or Nauru. The newness of Greylock's statehood is also key to the series: like other newly independent states, the community's leaders have to design a constitution, governance procedures, develop international relations, etc., from scratch.

The scenario depicted in *RoS* is not wholly alien to the US. While secessionist movements date back to attempts in Kentucky and Tennessee in the 1780s (Kreitner, 2020), the best known and most traumatic attempt to secede from the US occurred in 1860-65, when eleven south-eastern states formed the Confederate States of America and fought the remnant USA in a bitter civil war that the latter emerged victorious from, with the eleven states being folded back into the nation. More recent examples include a campaign for Californian secession (Morrison, 2015) that gained traction with the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president (Kenton, 2021) and white separatist aspirations for a monocultural Aryan homeland in the US northwest (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 2001; Clanton (2008). Similarly, there have been a series of micronational claims, the best known being the Conch Republic, declared in Key West, Florida in 1982 following a dispute about US Border patrol checkpoints in the Keys and subsequently maintained as a light-hearted tourist attraction (Miles, 2020); and North Dumpling Island, established by inventor-entrepreneur Dean Kamen in 1986 (Butkus, 2014). More recently, during the pre-production and production of *RoS* (but after the series' theme, narrative arc and episode structure were formulated), a collection of diverse radical groups and individuals initially inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement briefly set up what came to be known as the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle during June-July 2020. While purposely leader-less and without a strategy or agenda for sustained autonomy (Black Rose/ Rosa Negra, 2020; Evan, 2021), the spontaneous project provided a new type of secessionist entity in the US (albeit one partially prefigured by the Occupy Wall Street movement in Sept-Nov 2011) (Van Gelder, 2011).

Despite the previously discussed US examples, *RoS* writer-creator Jeffrey Paul King has identified Seborga, a 15 km² area in Liguria, north-west Italy, with a population of around 300, as the main inspiration for his series (Miller, 2021; Smith, 2021). Seborga has a long and complex history of having ill-defined borders and of being owned by various state and church bodies (Tombaccini, 2018). In 1963, a local opportunist, Giorgio Carbone, claimed that Seborga had been excluded from the territories assembled into the Kingdom of Italy in 1861 and could therefore form its own government and operate as a microstate within Italy (much like San Marino) (Klieger, 2014, p. 177). Carbone was elected head of state after a locally-organised election, with the title of Prince, and oversaw the development of trappings of state such as a cabinet of ministers, a flag and currency (Klieger, 2014, pp. 177-178). The Italian government has turned a blind eye to the whole enterprise

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and Seborga's quasi-national identity has mainly served as a useful tourist attraction. King has also identified Bir Tawil, an uninhabited area on Egypt's south-east border with Sudan that is claimed by neither country and, thereby, a *terra nullius*, as another inspiration (Miller, 2021).

In the following sections, the series' narrative is considered with regard to key stages in the assertion and establishment of the microstate, the internal and external issues that impinge on it and the series' general rhetoric about autonomy. Reference is also made to King's intentions and reflections on the series and to critical responses to it.

Greylock: The genesis and development of a microstate

RoS is set in a small town on a small, low-lying fictional island in the fictional Woonsock River that is represented as forming the narrow border between the US state of New Hampshire and the Canadian province of Quebec (see [Figure 1](#)). Linked to the south shore of the river by road bridges, the town is unambiguously and unproblematically part of the United States until a colourful drama of separation unfolds. The series takes its name from its central protagonist, a local High School history teacher in her late 20s/early 30s named Sarah Cooper (played by Australian-American actress Stella Baker). The first episode opens by providing an aerial vista of Greylock as a bucolic small town (Krieger, 2019, pp. 69-88; Orvell, 2009) of the type that has regularly been celebrated in US cinema as a repository of traditional community values (MacKinnon, 1984; Halper-Douglas Mazzio, 2011). The series' narrative is triggered by the state of New Hampshire granting a company, Leydon Industries, the right to mine a lode of coltran (a rare and high value mineral ore) that has been located underneath the town without any consultation with the local community. Cooper resolves to fight the development and, while looking for documentation to support local determination over the area's resources, finds a set of papers that establishes that the Greylock area had been omitted from the 1842 border agreements between the US and Canada due to the shifting nature of the river's course before the current town was established and the different dates at which Canadian and US cartographers had mapped it (and, hence, the border).

Figure 1: 'Sarah Cooper' and historic map, with Greylock as a river island (frame-grab image).



Source <https://cartermatt-bgmyzuarasgpkngxbrs.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Republic-of-Sarah-2.jpg>

King has stated that his interests in developing the series drew on his love “for maps and cartography” and his interests in the “myriad questions that come with building a nation on a smaller scale”, including everything from establishing a health system to designing a flag and getting local sports teams into international competitions (CW ATX TV Festival, 2021). In response to interviewer Emily Aslanian’s characterisation that the show resembled a “down-to-earth” version of “a world-building fantasy drama,” King concurred and coined the term “Poli Sci-Fi” to describe it (punning on the terms ‘Political Science’ and ‘Science Fiction’), identifying that new countries are regularly formed, such as, most recently, South Sudan (CW ATX TV Festival, 2021). In this manner, the show has a civics education function similar to that of previous US shows such as *The West Wing* (1999-2006), which educated viewers by exploring actual political and constitutional issues in fictional contexts (Crawley, 2006, pp. 30-31, 107-129). Such perspectives do not necessarily imply a didactic public service function for the dramas but rather that they raise issues of law, the constitution and governance in accessible and well-researched contexts where they are animated by the dramas concerned. Winthrop (2020) urges more such education in the US due to declining levels of civic knowledge about mechanisms and agencies of government amongst the US public that she and others have identified as contributing to a political dealignment by youth as well as suspicion and distrust of government activities. Such factors were quite evident amongst the supporters of Donald Trump and by Trump’s own conduct while US president (2017-2021). Unlike the *West Wing*, or more recent series such as *Designated Survivor* (2016-2019) however, *RoS* is complicated in that it frames its explorations of civic responsibility and democratic institutions and interaction within a secessionist framework that might be regarded as libertarian, given nation states’ innate proclivities to maintain their territorial integrity and stability. In this sense, the show’s civics function is primarily one that emphasises the power of citizens and the options available to them when commercial interests override community interests. As Sarah Cooper succinctly puts it midway through Episode 1,

Leydon industries and every other giant bloodsucking corporation that thinks they can walk all over average people in pursuit of a quick buck are more than welcome to go right to hell.

It is no accident that the Sarah Cooper character is an educator motivated by her knowledge of and belief in a just civic society and the mechanisms and agencies of its democratic government. Cooper commences her resistance after finding that the Governor of New Hampshire has awarded eminent domain over public land and a series of private properties to Leydon Industries. In one notable scene, the town’s park rotunda – an iconic feature of small towns across America – is demolished before the townspeople’s astonished eyes. These actions prompt Cooper to a conventional act of civil disobedience, standing in front of an excavator and impeding its progress, before moving to more unorthodox action. Based on the omission of the Greylock area from either US or Canadian territorial claims in the 1800s (and the lack of subsequent recognition of or address to that issue), Cooper advocates a declaration of independence as a tactic to delay the onset of mining while other legal options are sought. A New Hampshire judge hears her case and (somewhat improbably) allows a town referendum to be called on the issue, in which the town votes for independence by a majority of 1161 to 744.

The independence issue is deftly handled in the series. Due to Greylock’s claim that it was omitted from US-Canada border agreements, the declaration and promotion of its independence from the USA can be perceived to fall outside existing US strictures around secession from the union. The first deliberation on the legitimacy of an attempted secession from the US occurred as a result of a

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case brought by the state of Texas in 1868 over the legitimacy of US bonds sales made while Texas was claiming secession from the US during the Civil War (Texas v White, 74 U.S. 700). During its deliberations, the Supreme Court ruled that the US Constitution did not provide for states to secede from the US on unilateral bases; that any state-based policies or legislation relating to secessionist enterprises were thus invalid. This ruling has since been cited as the standard obstruction to any secessionist movement (Radan, 2016) and has not been successfully contested, overthrown or superceded.

RoS shows the national government invoking a different legal principal in response to the independence declaration when Sarah is arrested by the FBI at the end of Episode 1, shortly after declaring Greylock's independence, for conspiring "to overthrow the authority of the American government" under the ('catch-all') US 'Seditious Conspiracy' Law 18-2384, which states:

If two or more persons in any State or Territory, or in any place subject to the jurisdiction of the United States, conspire to overthrow, put down, or to destroy by force the Government of the United States, or to levy war against them, or to oppose by force the authority thereof, or by force to prevent, hinder, or delay the execution of any law of the United States, or by force to seize, take, or possess any property of the United States contrary to the authority thereof, they shall each be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than twenty years, or both.

The last prosecution using this law was undertaken in 2010 when members of the white supremacist Christian Hutaree movement, based in Michigan, were tried for planning a rebellion against the US (Richardson & Bellanger, 2014). Like that example, in which the prosecution was unsuccessful, the FBI move on Sarah Cooper also fails, with Episode 2 seeing her acquitted of sedition after a two month trial and with the judge's recommendation that the US give up its claim to Greylock. To Cooper's surprise, the New Hampshire Governor agrees not to contest the recommendation, with Greylock becoming a *de facto* independent country as a result. This part of the narrative is particularly telescoped, with the trial not being shown on-screen, and principally provides a pivot between the heady rebellious themes of the first episode and a series of reality checks for the new republic as it requires a series of compromises in order to survive. The first, in Episode 2, concerns electric power, as Greylock is cut off by US suppliers. An alternative is found, in the form of a Canadian wind farm run by a Québécois separatist. Without any other source of funding to pay them, Cooper has to revisit the original motivation for Greylock's independence and invite Leydon back to mine small areas of the town, even having to threaten eminent domain in order to get access to properties that the company requires access to.

Episode 3 tackles the next hurdle the country faces when the US and Canada close their borders with Greylock until diplomatic relations can be established. When asked how this isolation can be legal, Sarah makes the succinct statement that there are "two basic steps to becoming fully independent: 1) say you're a country and 2) get other countries to agree". This is accurate: various micronations have trumpeted recognition by individual states at various times as major successes (e.g. Seborga, which was allegedly recognised by Burkina Faso in 1998, Rufus, 2017). The episode shows the US as recognising Greylock as independent but using the lack of formal bilateral diplomatic relations to cut off transport links, stationing SWAT teams on the border and arresting Greylockians who attempt to smuggle in supplies from the US. This heavy-handed treatment

results in a US social media backlash: the New Hampshire governor is persuaded to recognise Greylock by Cooper as a face-saving move. Further tribulations follow concerning the town-state's relationship to the US banking and currency system (which requires it to establish its own currency) and the need to establish a legal system. Sarah Cooper's relatively unfettered power as a leader and spokesperson for the new state is also problematised within the series through the device of having a US investigative journalist write an in-depth profile, identifying her as a dictator (albeit a benevolent one). This angle accords with the common pattern of micronations being the brainchildren of individuals who assume the trappings of state and titles of rulers in their putative fiefdoms, such as Denys Tremblay in the Kingdom of L'Anse-Saint-Jean, Quebec (Gardinetti & Vezina, 2021); and Leonard Casley in the Principality of Hutt River, Western Australia (Bicudo di Castro & Kober, 2018). Unlike such micronations however, Sarah Cooper sets up a legislative assembly and constitution. The latter has an interesting provision: it must be revisited every five years so that "as Greylock's people grow and evolve, so will Greylock."

Interwoven with these political and administrative issues, a set of sub-themes and character interactions provide dramatic interest and colour throughout the series. These involve elements such as Sarah Cooper's brother, Danny, being the Leydon Industries representative in Greylock and, in a plot development that precipitates the series' final engagement with international *realpolitik*, the arrival of the Cooper siblings' long absent father, Paul, in Greylock and his unmasking as a celebrated whistle-blower who has long been sought by US authorities. Aside from the personal impact of a long-lost parent returning – and doing so as a celebrated radical fugitive – the US's reaction to his presence in Greylock provides the series with its climactic dilemma. Episode 13, the series finale, offers a resolution to Greylock's tentative hold on micro-statehood. After presenting an ambitious address to the public and assembled media in which she characterises Greylock as "the world's newest country: a place for compassion, innovation and progress" in Episode 12, Sarah identifies the stresses of Greylock "floundering in the waters of partial recognition" in Episode 13, somewhat tenuously citing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as examples of that situation. A way out of her political impasse is provided by the US State Department, which offers Greylock a fast track to recognition if she hands her father over to US agents for trial. The language used in this scene is notably condescending, with the operative offering to make this "little Poly Sci experiment of yours legit" and thereby enable her and her state to leave "the kids' table" (presumably a reference to fanciful micronations and/or minimally recognised microstates) and "sit with the adults" (implicitly in contexts such as the UN). Tempting as the offer is, Sarah Cooper resolves to uphold the compassion she has identified as a key aspect of Greylock in Episode 12 and to allow her father continuing refuge in the county. However, her gesture is undercut by her father, who redeems his previous desertion of his daughter by handing himself in to US officers, and thus allowing Greylock to move quickly towards established statehood.

Discussion

With viewing figures for the show consistently low on the CW network (Maglio, 2021), despite the prominence that the show was subsequently given on online platforms such as Stan, a proposed second series of the show did not materialise and the finalisation of Greylock's relationship with the US and the international community has gone unexplored. Based on critical reviews and viewers' social media responses, the consensus was that the series' attempts to

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represent political issues in a complex manner *and* develop conventional narratives in a show targeted at CW's young adult demographic was too ambitious. A review in *Variety*, for instance, characterised the show as “just doing its best to tread water without sinking under the weight of its complex premise” (Framke, 2021). Another review concurred that,

It's a *lot*. And it feels highly unnecessary. It doesn't give the independence story enough space to breathe and put down roots in reality.... And it's mired in too much CW-style family drama and teen/YA sexual innuendo to make any headway (Keller, 2021; emphasis in original).

Still, over 13 episodes the series explored a series of issues concerning secession and the establishment of statehood that gave them more weight than more comical media explorations of microstatehood and/or micronationality, such as the British film *Passport to Pimlico* (1949), or more recently, the BBC's *How to start your own country* (BBC, 2005), ABC TV Australia's *Micro nation* (ABC TV, 2012) or the Italian feature *L'isola delle rose* (2020).

Aside from being a quirky small town drama that engages with practical issues of establishing a microstate, the show sits within the spectrum of responses to the excessive sway that corporations have in public life and decision making that include, at one end, initiatives such as the Occupy Wall Street Movement (Hardt and Negri, 2011) and, at the other, Donald Trump's (empty) rhetoric of ‘draining the swamp’ of lobbyist and corporate interest groups in Washington (Burgers, Tjien Fa & de Graaf, 2019). Greylock's secession is represented as awkward and irritating to New Hampshire and the US but not in any way politically subversive. As the show constantly emphasises, its activists – and school history teacher Sarah Cooper, in particular – take their inspiration from the citizens who rose above themselves to fight in the American War of Independence from Britain in 1775-1783. Indeed, the newly autonomous Greylock takes its model of participatory democracy from the founding tenets of the United States. When asked about this aspect of the series, and whether he thought that it could be considered “unpatriotic”, King rejected the characterisation and cited that the corporation and the manipulative governor of New Hampshire were the “enemy” of the people of Greylock and the cause of their secession, not the US state or US democracy. In his characterisation,

in terms of how Americans should feel about it, ideally, what I'd like them to feel is the show to be an auspicious reminder [that] you can make your world for yourself – ideally, it's a inspiration... if you don't like the way that your town is treating the powerless, then run for office yourself. Roll up your sleeves and use the legal system and use the courts and use your power as an individual to change things (CTW, 2019).

Understood in this manner, the secession and microstatehood presented in the series essentially represent participatory democracy, as it might be imagined: either to have operated in an ideal, pre-corporate, prelapsarian moment; or to operate in a more ideal future.

Conclusion

Even as an emergent microstate, Greylock represents small town America as it might have been and might still be. In these regards, *The Republic of Sarah* series is both nostalgic and an

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exercise in near-future “Poli SciFi” (as Hill has characterised it). This orientation is notably different from the Libertarian/anti-Government premise and intent of other secessionist impulses such as Seasteading (Binder, 2016; Simpson, 2016) and the setting up of small, autonomous entities beyond state territorial waters. Nestled between New Hampshire and Quebec and washed by the waters of the (fictional) Boonsack River, Greylock is carefully represented as the US in micro, locked into its continental position and inflected by the settler history of the continent.

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