The Paradox of National Identity: Region, Nation, and Canadian Idol

Boulou Ebanda de B’béri & Ruth Middlebrook
University of Ottawa

Abstract: This paper focuses on the 2006 season of the reality television show Canadian Idol and the manufacturing of Canadian identity. Our analysis looks specifically at the way Canadian identity was articulated in the production of the show, the comments of the judges to contestants, the comments in news releases, and the viewers’ discussions on the message board accompanying the show. We argue that the show produces a version of Canadian identity that sustains a logic of regional difference, with a key point of distinction between urban and non-urban Canadians. However, we also indicate that this representation is ruptured by the viewers’ debates on their feelings of Canadian identity.

Keywords: Articulation; Canadian identities; Canadian Idol; Regionalism, nationalism, globalism; Representation; Viewer response

In the world of international capital, difference is a contentious and paradoxical concept. On the one hand, as individuals increasingly position

Boulou Ebanda de B’béri is the founding director of the Audiovisual Media Lab for the study of Cultures and Societies (http://www.arts.uottawa.ca/lamacs) and teaches film and cultural studies in the Department of Communication at the University of Ottawa, 554 King Edward Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5. Email: b.deberri@uottawa.ca. Ruth Middlebrook holds a Master’s degree in Communication Studies from the University of Ottawa. She works in the field of professional communications for Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, QC, K1A 0J9. Email: ruth.middlebrook@hrsdc-rhdsc.gc.ca.
themselves within and across a variety of identities . . . capital seizes upon such differences in order to create new markets and products. Ideas that hold the promise of producing social criticism are insinuated into products in an attempt to subordinate the dynamics of social struggle to the production of new lifestyles. On the other hand, difference is also a dangerous marker of those historical, political, social and cultural borderlands where people who are considered the “Other” are often policed, excluded and oppressed. 

Henry Giroux (1994, p. 12)

Introduction

This article is divided into two main sections. In the first section, we analyze the recruitment procedures of the 2006 season of Canadian Idol, along with judges’ comments on contestants’ performances and the show’s official news releases. We conclude this first section by noting that the 2006 season of Canadian Idol privileged an articulation of regional Canadian identities, but that the articulation is problematic conceptually, because it does not illustrate the complex fabric of Canada’s multicultural identity formations. In the second section, we focus on the message boards for Canadian Idol in an attempt to observe whether the show’s meta-discourse on regional Canadian identities fuelled the online discussions and debates of viewers. We found that although Canadian Idol obviously fuelled online topics, discussions did not simply mirror the discursive claims of the television show. Paradoxically, we found that although some viewers, especially those from marginal cultures, were able to contest the stereotypical representation of their identities on the show or on the message boards, the discourse of the show generated the frame of their discussion about their own identity. In addition, through an analysis of some online discussions, we were able to test Benedict Anderson (1991) and Michael Ignatieff’s (1993) understanding of a national imagined community as plural, heterogeneous, and contingent.

It is now known that television occupies a privileged position in most Canadian households, and its narratives, images, and stories provide viewers with a framework for thinking about and making sense of the world (Giroux, 1994; Hall, 1990; Halloran, 1996), including their nation, region, culture, and identity. It is also known that television viewers are not a homogeneous group and therefore do not draw the same meaning from these images (Ang, 1996; Giroux, 1994; Hall, 1990, 1997). However, television, as with other mass media, has the power to represent and thus to articulate a framework within which viewers consider the images that they encounter. This very framework also provides the conditions for examining the ways in which practices of identity are being worked and re-worked to become “invisible” or naturalized. In this paper, we use Canadian Idol to understand the paradox of representing a sense of national “unity,” through an “idol,” among regionally defined viewers. In so doing, we focus our analysis on the 2006 season of Canadian Idol, in which Québec singer Eva Avila was pitted against Newfoundland and Labrador’s Craig Sharpe in the final. Avila won by a slim margin of 3%, or 131,000 votes. Québec and Newfoundland and Labrador are two Canadian provinces that are known to represent a strong sense of region-
alism and nationalism. Thus, having contestants from these Canadian provinces at the final stage of this national competition makes Canadian Idol an interesting case study, especially because more than 26 million votes were cast in the 2006 season (Brunton & Bowlby, 2006c).

To examine the procedures that informed the production of representations of Canadian identity on Canadian Idol, we use the 2006 show’s processes of contestant selection, comments made by the judges to the contestants following their performances, the official show news releases, and online responses of viewers. We focus our analysis specifically on online discussions that tend to articulate a meta-discourse of Canadian national identity with regional representation or symbols. Our analysis of selected online discussions suggests that viewers of this show externalize regional feelings of belonging to engage in a revealing way with the show’s meta-discourse on Canadian identity.

In sum, our analysis focuses on the show procedures that attempt to render invisible the manufacturing of a certain kind of Canadian identity. We suggest that the paradox of national identity lies in the ways in which, on the one hand, the 2006 season of Canadian Idol represents a seemingly transparent, democratic process of selecting a national “idol” who could stand in for all Canadian viewers of the show, and, on the other hand, this process manufactures the national idol by fuelling this idol’s identity with specific regional and urban discourses.

Like all other Idol shows, Canadian Idol articulates an essentially urban youth identity manufactured to represent all Canadians, locally and globally. Yet we contend that the 2006 season of Canadian Idol represents a version of Canadian identity that generates both affective feelings of regional belonging and a global sense of identification. Our discussion extends the comments of Paul Attallah and Derek Foster (2006) that the primary target of Canadian Idol is a local, young Canadian audience, which is anticipated, however, to have a global culture of reality television:

In other words, Canadian Idol locates Canadian culture within global youth phenomenon such that its interchangeability with other Idol shows is precisely the marker of a shared international youth culture. Canadian Idol is “Canadian” not in the folkloric sense of having been designed by committee with the specific intent of inculcating appropriate themes and attitudes but in the sense of connecting successfully with its audience. (Attallah & Foster, 2006, p. 193)¹

The specificity of Canadian Idol is therefore the way in which this show represents “glocal”—that is, at the same time both global and local—conditions that present the possibility of a national identity. Indeed, despite the global aspirations of this show, which gear toward youthful viewers, Canadian Idol articulates Canadian identity as a local, regional framework that is also urban in focus. Similarly, Michele Byers (2008) notes that Canadian Idol promotes a regional sense of identity that tends to exclude non-urban identities. Indeed, as our analysis of selected online discussions suggests, the viewers of this show externalize regional feelings of belonging in order to engage in a revealing way with the show’s meta-discourse on Canada. In addition, we notice that the recruitment process during the 2006 season of Canadian Idol was such that urban Canadians
mainly had the opportunity to try out for the program. For example, we note that the show’s official celebrity judging panel did not visit the more remote areas of Canada during the 2006 audition process. We want to suggest that in failing to do so, the contestant selection procedures during the 2006 season of *Canadian Idol* eliminated the contingent, plural, and multicultural dimensions of Canadian identity. This focus naturalizes particular groups and regions of Canada as representative of all Canadians. This seemingly innocent representation of the figure of a national idol is paradoxical, in part because the procedural codes used to create the show mobilize global democratic principles, but also because the dominant local, regional, and urban codes eliminate contingencies inherent in multicultural nations such as Canada.

**From nationalism to regional Canadian identity**

The context in which the television show *Canadian Idol* articulates regional identity fits perfectly within the way some researchers describe the development of feelings of nationalism. Nationalism, as defined by Ernest Gellner, is based on groups of persons sharing a “similarity of culture” (1997, p. 3). Although Gellner adheres to this basic definition, he also admits that defining nationalism is complex, because certain nations can only survive by allowing cultural differences to prosper within national boundaries. He notes that while national governments can decide whether to enforce adherence to the same culture, allowing cultural pluralism to flourish within the nation is a more appropriate choice.

For Benedict Anderson (1991), nationalism is constitutive of modernism in that it is an articulation of political and economic frameworks. Nationalism also denotes plurality, because nations always contain the possibility of multiple cultural groups; Anderson calls this “sub-nationalism.” Indeed, for Anderson, nations often have subnationalisms operating within national borders, “nationalisms which, naturally, dream of shedding this subness one happy day” (Anderson, 1991, p. 3). From this, it could be speculated that within multicultural nations such as Canada, many cultural groups, such as those of Québec and Newfoundland and Labrador, could dream of being apart from the dominant nation one day.

Michael Ignatieff’s (1993) discussion of nationalism is reminiscent of Gellner’s (1997) and Anderson’s (1991) reflections. For Ignatieff, the nation is a collection of people sharing not only a similarity of culture, but a variety of cultures as well. Ignatieff uses Canada’s federalism as a way to allow people to get rid of the doctrine of nationalism, which holds that (1) the world’s people are divided into nations, (2) these nations should have the rights of self-determination, and (3) full self-determination requires statehood. For Ignatieff, the notion of federalism allows for differences within the multiregional cultural politics of Canada, because federalism is “a particular way of sharing political power among different peoples within” a nation, and “those who believe in federalism hold that different peoples do not need states of their own in order to enjoy self-determination” (Ignatieff, 1993, p. 110).

This discussion of the notion of nationalism indicates that while nations are composed of groups of people sharing both a similarity and variety of cultures, in reality, a recognized national culture always involves cultural differences. For
example, within the multicultural, multiprovincial, multilingual, and multiregional nation of Canada, there are very often different identities—and group formations that want to express their distinctiveness and/or want to be part of the recognized national culture. This presents cultural and national contingencies that often result in various political challenges. Here, we want to make the case that both the production of Canadian Idol and online discussions on the representation of Canadian identity by the viewers of this show are wonderful objects for observing the ways in which the show manufactures certain versions of Canadian identity that are premised on sustaining a logic of regional difference and urban focus.

Indeed, in analyzing the procedure through which the producers of Canadian Idol select the show participants, one witnesses articulations of Canada’s nationalism that are based on territorial discrimination. In contrast with Ignatieff’s proposition that federalism is fundamentally the accommodation of difference, we argue that Idol’s articulation of regional difference reveals the limits of federalism. This Idol uses a logic of regionalism, which suppresses a consideration of the contingencies of cultural differences in the conceptualization, production, and representation of Canadian identity. With such an example, we witness some of the problematic aspects of the production of difference. Here, we can witness the fact that particular political, social and cultural identity formations are excluded or considered to be the “Other” (Giroux, 1994, p. 12). Boulou Ebanda de B’béri (2008) describes this as a process of producing “other-others.” Indeed, the question here is not whether a particular television show (Canadian Idol, in this case), produced by a private company that has profitability as its primary focus (CTV, in this case), could possibly capture the multicultural complexity of an entire nation, but rather what is framed to represent a national idol and how this is framed. To understand these processes better, we examine more closely how this logic unfolds in the production of the show.

**Manufacturing a national Idol**

Idol is a franchise show with many versions around the world. The show originated in the U.K. as Pop Idol in 2001. The basic premise for Idol shows such as Canadian Idol is that a representative—one contestant, therefore someone from one region of a country—can be manufactured to stand in for the whole country. The procedures by which an idol is selected expose the way in which deep feelings of regionalism operate as a central characteristic of Canadian identity. Indeed, this process starts with a team of four judges visiting pre-selected locations to recruit talented singers to appear on the show. Once recruited in the initial round of competition, the singers are eliminated until only 10 finalists remain. At this point in the competition, the show is broadcast on television on a twice-weekly basis. The panel of judges offers commentary on each contestant’s performance. After each broadcast, the show’s host, Ben Mulroney, encourages viewers from across Canada to vote for the performer(s) of their choice. Viewers have two hours to vote for their favourite contestant(s). Voting is done by way of telephone or text messaging (for Telus subscribers). The results are tabulated, and each week the performer who receives the lowest number of votes is eliminated from the show. This process of elimination is similar for all Idol franchises. Finally, two singers remain, and the one with the highest number of votes is
crowned the national idol. This lucky winner receives, among other things, a recording contract.

To recruit singers for the 2006 edition of the Canadian Idol show, the judges held auditions in a total of 11 Canadian cities: Vancouver, Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, Kitchener-Waterloo, Toronto, Ottawa, Montréal, Halifax, St. John’s, and Yellowknife. The producers of the show claimed to have travelled across the country in their quest to find the best idol. Nonetheless, guiding this pre-selection of audition locations is a frame that divides Canada into a set of regional identities with dominant urban centres. At the hub of each region is a distinct urban centre, promoting a particular identity. This process of selecting cities for auditions illustrates perfectly the impossibility of framing other contingencies of national identities—their complex, shifting, and changing articulations—that compose multicultural nations such as Canada.

Again, one would overlook the main point of this analysis if tempted to ask why this CTV Idol show should represent the cultural complexity of Canada. As we argued above, a different formulation of the question would ask not only what the a priori thing admitted to be “Canadian national identity” or “Canadian Identity” is, but also how this “Canadian thing” is represented and what importance the production procedures of Canadian Idol have in this process of representation. Indeed, the question should really remain at the level of conceptual articulations of the national idol itself—e.g., Canadian, National, Idol, et cetera—which produce and induce the viewers to frame particular meaning about their Canadian identity. Therefore, while it would be relevant to consider the production economy of the Idol show, one must also ask how the winning idol is manufactured to become the last contestant, standing in for a national symbol, deserving the national fans’ support.

We must capture the conditions of the possibility of systemic discrimination; for example, those of the kind of urban–regional divide and “gatekeeping” at the core of the recruitment process of Canadian Idol, which decides the cities in which auditions are held. Indeed, we must ask not only why it is that a specific culture, region, or city is privileged, but also which ones (and their residents) are possibly excluded in this process. For example, in comparing the relatively small number of cities and regions that are represented on the 2006 season of the show with the complexity of Canada’s regional identities, one could extrapolate a dominant urban-based, regional-cultural identity. From this perspective, the region of the winning contestant defines the cultural identity of the rest of Canada.

During the 2006 season of Canadian Idol, not only were auditions held in a limited number of pre-selected cities, but also the four official judges did not visit the more “remote” areas in their quest to find the national idol. For example, when Canadian Idol held auditions in Yellowknife, none of the four core judges went to evaluate the performances. While it would be possible to argue that local Yellowknife judges are in a better position to examine contestants in their region, it would also be arguable that the core judges did not go to this area due to the perception that this region is less important compared with other pre-selected Canadian cities in a hierarchical conceptualization. As Robert Chambers (1983) suggests, such discriminatory practices favour urban paradigms of knowledge
because, most often, “urban researchers” (which in this context can be well substitut-ed with “core show judges”), “are attracted to and trapped in urban ‘cores’ which generate and communicate their own sort of knowledge while rural ‘peripheries’ are isolated and neglected” (Chambers, 1983, p. 2). Leo Dreidger (2003) uses the metaphor of urban “watering holes” to analyze the relationship between urban centres and their hinterlands. He notes:

Provincial capitals such as Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto, Québec City and Halifax . . . tend to dominate their respective provincial regions. Indeed, each metropolis can be seen as a mini-system with its own quite different downtown, slum and suburban residential areas. Each urban centre acts as watering hole for its region, and acts as a magnet to the watering place (p. 594).

From the above examples, we want to suggest that through these selection procedures, the producers of Canadian Idol define, produce, and manufacture a national idol. In doing so, Canadian Idol reinforces the traditional, naturalized relation of power that some urban centres have within Canada. Such relations of power go above existing social and geographical boundaries, because they exclude considerations of race, ethnicity, and language, not to mention sexuality and gender, among other possible contingencies of multicultural nations. For example, although an audition was held in Yellowknife—reinforcing the global Idol principles of transparency and democracy—one could still argue that the absence of all four core judges in Yellowknife made the audition’s primarily Aboriginal contestants look like “other-others” within Canada, thus meriting “special” treatment. Furthermore, while no Aboriginal contestants were selected as finalists for the show, Michele Byers (2008) rightly points out that many other social, cultural, and political identities were also not represented on Canadian Idol, for example, “[p]oor, recent immigrants . . . refugees, religious but not Christian, and non-English- or French-speaking” (Byers, 2008, p. 71), and many other relevant group formations that constitute Canada’s diverse identities.

Put differently, by virtue of willing to produce a unitary, sanitized image of a national symbol—an idol—Canadian Idol’s adopted process of (pre)selecting cities for contestants’ primary auditions runs the risk of silencing national, political, and cultural struggles. In addition to promoting a dominant regional breakdown of national identity while reinforcing the value of specific urban centres, Canadian Idol fits within the notion of “glocal” processes of representation. Because Canadian Idol articulates a discriminatory regional politics of identity with global modes of reality television production, this show frames a world that is outside most Canadian frameworks of representation. In other words, Canadian Idol creates an exotic/familiar world with pre-selected models and symbols from which the rest of Canadians are induced to produce and frame their national identity, including those viewers who have no local contestants competing in the show, that is, those who are predetermined to reside in “remote” regions.

We find that the generic structure of this reality television show reinforces systemic ideological practices that produce a fictitious sense of belonging to the nation via selected, dominant regions. This process of formulating reality with a
selection of specific symbols speaks to postcolonial reflections on silenced cultural tensions taking place in multicultural nations. As Homi Bhabha (1995) notes, because national cultures are never unitary in themselves, in most national settings, some dominant cultures tend to stand in for the plurality or the diversity of all cultures. It is almost too natural for some humans to dominate others by imposing their worldviews on them (de B’béri, 2006), especially in nations made up of a diverse collection of cultures in which “others” are rarely treated as equals (Bhabha, 1990; Desroches & Fleras, 1986). In the case of Canadian Idol, we find that the show’s procedures of production indicate that some urban regions are the dominant cultures that stand in for the Canadian nation.

Although Canadian Idol represents Canadian identity as composed primarily of regional identities, particularly urban regional identities, in reality, Canada is a nation of approximately 33,374,250 people, and its citizens compose different cultural communities (Statistics Canada, 2008). Canadians have different racial, ethnic, and religious origins. And the 2006 season of Canadian Idol represented the regional aspect of Canadian identity as primordial; the show depicted some regions, specifically those least populated, as “other-others.” For example, during the contestant recruitment process, those auditioning in Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as in the Yukon, were asked, “What makes [your province/territory] unique” (Brunton & Bowlby, 2006g)? Asking these contestants what makes their province or territory unique reflects not only a clear articulation of identity based on region, but also a specific discursive bias, which discriminates against Canadians from less geographically central urban areas, such as St. John’s and Yellowknife. We came to this conclusion because similar questions were not posed to contestants who auditioned in other Canadian cities. Indeed, we see here an articulation of regional and urban hierarchies imposed on specific Canadians’ identity and the meta-discourse that produces these hierarchies.

The judges’ comments to contestants and the show’s official news releases were also instrumental in representing a meta-discourse of Canadian identity as primarily regional. For example, in evaluating contestants’ weekly performances, the judges made continual reference to the province or city from which each contestant came. On one occasion, judge Jake Gold commented on the performance of contestant Craig Sharpe, saying, “You’re from Newfoundland so there is a good chance you’re going on . . . the people in Newfoundland know how to support their people.” Additionally, judge Sass Jordan said to Sharpe, “Craig, the first time I saw you in Newfoundland I thought you were a star and my opinion has not changed one bit.” Furthermore, when commenting on one of contestant Rob James’ performances, judge Zack Werner said, “Winnipeg don’t take no (bleep)” (Brunton & Bowlby, 2006a).

In Canadian Idol news releases, there were also several references to the contestants’ regions of origin. For example, when announcing the winner of the 2006 season, the official news release read, “Gatineau’s Eva Avila took the Canadian Idol title Sunday night in the closest race in the show’s four-year history. Defeating Newfoundland’s Craig Sharpe by only 3.3 per cent of the vote” (Brunton & Bowlby, 2006d). Additionally, Avila’s Québec origins were pointed out in another news release, which read, “[T]he biggest expert of all on the trilin-
gual Gatineau girl’s beauty could be her boyfriend, Canadian Idol’s Top 4 finisher Chad Doucette” (Brunton & Bowlby, 2006e).

The recruitment procedures, judges’ comments, and official news releases reveal the processes by which Canadian Idol articulated a nationalism that is regionally based, with an urban focus, during its 2006 season. In this representation of Canadian identity as a selective regional phenomenon, the show’s producers avoid and contain the very real challenges facing a multicultural nation such as Canada. These challenges include barriers to intercultural communication (Johnson, 1997), discrimination against minority groups (Bhabha, 1990, 1995; Desroches & Fleras, 1986), and the separatist ambitions of the “sub”-nations existing within all contemporary nations (Anderson, 1991).

Paradoxically, however, in presenting the figure of the idol as a unitary symbol that stands in for the complex, shifting, and heterogeneous character of a multicultural nation, the Idol franchise inadvertently makes visible some of the inner-contours that shape particular dominant ideologies representing the nation. We suggest that Canadian Idol articulates Canadian identity with a utopian global system of international identification that, ironically, is crafted with local feelings of belonging. We can make such a case because the 2006 season of this show featured two contestants, Eva Avila and Craig Sharpe, who are respectively from Québec and Newfoundland and Labrador, two Canadian provinces conscious of their regional and national identity.

Activating local chords of belonging
Kathleen LeBesco (2004) argues that reality television viewers “are well equipped to reflect on how manipulation by editors produces certain impressions about characters that may or may not be accurate” (p. 272). Further, she notes that viewers “are willing to talk back, to produce contrary readings” to that of reality television shows (p. 286). LeBesco’s study of the impact on public discourse of the reality television show Survivor provides an excellent framework for thinking through television viewers’ discussion of on-screen representations. In a similar vein, this article turns to Canadian Idol’s online fan discourse, paying particular attention to the expressions of regional and national identification.

Three recurrent themes of discussion in relation to the notions of nationalism and regionalism emerged on the Canadian Idol online message boards during the 2006 competition: identity, separatism, and inequality. The first theme we want to address is the debate among viewers about the appropriate terms to use when referring to Canadians from Québec and from Newfoundland and Labrador—specifically, how to “name” their identities. This discussion stemmed from a message that “Nation Girl” posted, in which she discussed the reference to persons from Newfoundland and Labrador as “Newfies.” She argued that some Canadians might view the term as endearing, yet it could be inappropriate to use as some people might find it offensive. Specifically, she wrote:

I wish you would please stop referring to Newfoundlanders [and] Labradorians as “Newfies.” This word is quite offensive to a lot of people from this province. While I imagine some of you don’t realize this and only use the word as a term of endearment, it can be quite offensive to some. . . . While [some Canadians] may not be offended by the term
used frequently to describe Newfoundlanders, it is offensive to some. Shouldn’t we at least respect that, even if you don’t agree? (September 25, 2006)

Her post elicited some interesting responses. For example, “NLgirl” responded, “If people find it offensive th[en] it shouldn’t be used” (September 25, 2006). “I have come to realize that some people find that term offensive and so I am refraining from using it here now” (September 28, 2006).

“Rex is number 1!!,” on the other hand, argued that the term was acceptable for use, but only in limited circumstances: “Certainly there are people who are offended by the term Newfie. . . . Personally, it doesn’t offend me as a rule, unless the context of how it’s being used is meant to be offensive” (September 26, 2006).

“Nancie” noted that this term is inescapable. She argued that people will call those from Newfoundland and Labrador “Newfies” even if they know that these people find the term offensive: “We’ve been over this again and again. Unfortunately there are still people who think the term ‘Newfie’ is a cute name or a term of endearment. If they want to keep the name going, that’s up to them, no one can stop them. It’s unfortunate” (September 27, 2006).

While the majority of persons from Newfoundland and Labrador writing on the message board agreed that the term was pejorative, those from outside the region used the board to admit that they would continue to use it. For example, “Smartguy24” argued that he was baffled that persons from Newfoundland and Labrador might be offended by the use of this term. He wrote:

Well it sure beats typing out Newfoundlanders all the time. . . . I can’t recall anybody using the word Newfie in the derogatory sense in this thread . . . but I find the fact that some people can be so easily offended by the word “Newfie” no matter how it[‘s] used . . . totally baffling. (“Smartguy24,” September 25, 2006)

The response of “Psiico” to this discussion mirrored the retort from “Smartguy24.” He was also baffled by the idea that calling persons from Newfoundland and Labrador “Newfies” was unacceptable. He wrote:

Are you serious? People from Newfoundland are actually offended by the term newfie? Since when? I’ve never met one yet . . . although . . . I’m not as exposed to them the past 15 years. I have to be honest, I never thought I’d see the day. Political correctness has truly run amok. (“Psiico,” September 26, 2006)

Other discussions were based on the appropriateness of calling Québécois “French frogs.” For example, “Reba Grouette” posted, “I am a [F]rench frog and proud of it” (September 28, 2006). “Sjleafsfan” responded in disagreement with her, stating, “[I] don’t like [the term French frog]” (September 28, 2006). “Newfiegurl,” an active participant on the list, posted a response concerning both the appropriateness of referring to persons from Newfoundland and Labrador as “Newfies” and the Québécois as “French frogs.” She wrote:

People we have to admit [we’re] not the only province or people who are called such names as Newfies and I have heard the term frog before. Since we don’t live in a far from perfect world [sic] it’s unfortunate that
people are labeled and looked down on because of where they come from or their race which is very sad. Sometimes we miss out on knowing the nicest people in the world because of our ignorance, and I say [this be]cause at some point and time we have all done it whether as a joke or unintentionally or simply just to be rude. In a perfect world we would judge a person for themselves only not race, colour, where they come from or their background. (“Newfiegurl,” September 30, 2006)

These viewers’ discussions about the labelling of groups of Canadians fulfill Anderson’s (1991) and Ignatieff’s (1993) understanding of a national imagined community as plural, heterogeneous, and contingent. In many of the message board posts, the participants expressed a notion of their fellow Canadians, debated the persistence and use of stereotypical labels such as “Newfie” or “French frog,” and learned why people from Newfoundland and Labrador and Québec might not appreciate being referred to with these terms. Interestingly, this discussion on the message boards is quite different from the portrayal of regional identity on the Canadian Idol show. This is, perhaps, an indication that while there are dominant discourses from the show that frame the debate and discussion of the nation, the producers of Canadian Idol do not have “an unadulterated form of domination” (Giroux, 1994, p. 22) over the viewers of this show. While the show’s meta-discourse on Canadian regional identity obviously fuelled the online discussion viewers engaged in, the debates did not simply mirror the terms of the show. The viewers seem to articulate different meanings and raise subjective understandings of the concept of identity.

Nationalism and separatism were other keen points of discussion on the Canadian Idol message boards. The question that instigated the debate was whether a Québécois, such as Eva Avila, should be viewed through or associated with the Québec separatist movement. “Newfiegurl” was one individual who felt that all Québécois were necessarily separatist:

I would think the Canadians who did vote for Eva should [be] feeling . . . really stupid at this point[.] Why give someone the . . . Canadian Idol . . . title when her province [does not] want to be a part of Canada [?] How dumb is that [?] Well it[’s] one up for the [Newfoundlanders.] [T]his time at least we were smart enough to vote for a true Canadian[.] Maybe next year they should rename the show Québec (We don’t want to be a part of Canada) Idol. Now he looks dumb. (“Newfiegurl,” September 21, 2006)

Although “Newfiegurl” lumped all Québécois into a category of “not wanting to be a part of Canada,” “Smartguy24” pointed out that just because some Québécois desire to separate from Canada, it is important to remember that not all Québécois want to do this. He commented: “Its [sic] not all of Québec who want [sic] to sep[a]rate . . . there is a separ[at]ist portion that wants that . . . but the rest of Québec is quite content with being a part of Canada” (September 21, 2006). He also reminded other fans that Avila did not associate herself with separatism. He wrote, “At no point . . . at absolutely no point, did Eva say she was one of those sep[a]ratists. She’s proud to be Canadian in case you haven’t noticed. You’re discriminating based on where she’s from. Not to mention calling all Eva voters stupid” (September 21, 2006).
This discussion between “Smartguy24” and “Newfiegurl” illustrates the ways in which multiple and contesting meanings emerged in discussions of Idol. At a meta-theoretical level, such discussions reveal how particular discourses of discrimination and meaning may be contested and yet may rely on particular conceptions of difference (Bhabha, 1990; Desroches & Fleras, 1986). But the questions raised by “Newfiegurl” remain interesting for this analysis. Her questions allow us to argue that the symbolic power of an idol that stands in as a national representative is real for some viewers. Indeed, her position suggests that Avila, from Québec, does not only represent Québec, but also the nation of Canada, because Avila is from a province with a strong history of nationalism.

Another thematic point of interest in the message board discussions centres on the nature of inequality. Similar to the question of identity, this discussion included the appropriateness of making discriminatory jokes about minority cultural groups within Canada. “Idoladdict” and “Newfiegurl,” for example, recognized that Canadians are not all treated equally. “Idoladdict” commented:

While I don’t agree that all Canadians are treated equally[,] it’s not only Newfoundlanders that people make comments about . . . . All I hear from people is that people from Ontario, Torontonians in particular are so rude and inconsiderate, and that they think too highly of themselves, and all other kinds of junk that is far from true. . . . Jokes are made about all kinds of different people. Is it right? No, but it does happen. . . . Don’t think that you’re the only Canadians who get negative comments made about them. (September 19, 2006)

And “Newfiegurl” pointed out, “[F]or the person who thinks all Canadians are treated equal—get real” (September 19, 2006).

Annette Hill’s (2007) research speaks directly to the way in which television programming, including the reality television genre, actively constructs “reality” and how viewers interpret these representations. She argues:

[T]he reality television genre can be understood as a feral genre, a genre experiment that has a disruptive influence on truth claims within factuality. Viewers’ critical engagement with the truth claims in news, documentary and reality TV indicates an awareness of a “reality effect” on many aspects of factual programming . . . reflexive modes of engagement with factuality explore aesthetic issues and the impact they have on evaluations of truth claims. The restyling of factuality has therefore opened up abstract concepts like truth. (pp. 112-113)

In looking at the online discussion on the Canadian Idol message board, we see, in everyday discourse, the challenges that multicultural societies face. We also see that the message board discussion on identity, separatism, and inequality does not directly reflect the show’s representation of a happy unity between regional and national identity. The Canadian national context, the nature of Canadian multiculturalism, and the folkloric importance of a regional sense of belonging articulated in the show, however, remain instrumental points of online debate on the topics of identity, separatism, and inequality. As argued by Giroux (1994) and Hall (1990, 1997), we could attest that Canadian Idol is not able to
exert complete control over how viewers make sense of their represented identity on the show. However, it should be noted that the Canadian Idol message board provided a space for viewers to discuss the tensions between their regional and national identities articulated on this show. What is then articulated in this manifestation and contestation is perhaps the juxtaposition of local sense of belonging with global/national/hierarchical references, or as Ien Ang (1991) points out, it is an “integrated mode of survival” (p. 7) for those groups of people in the margins of multicultural nations who have nevertheless had external references of identification imposed on them.

**Conclusion**

In the 2006 season of Canadian Idol, the contingent, complex, provisional, and multicultural dimensions of the Canadian nation are represented as a unit(y), an idol/token standing in for a stable Canadian-identity. This idol tends to eliminate fundamental differences that constitute being or becoming Canadian. In exploring the paradox of national identity, we have examined the context through which the television show Canadian Idol manufactures specific practices to represent Canadian identity, as well as the ways in which viewers engage with the existing meta-discourse of Canadian identity articulated on the show. In its 2006 season, Canadian Idol employed some practices of representation through its procedure of recruitment, its judges’ comments, and the branding of the show through official news releases, to help manufacture a specific Canadian identity based on regional—and more specifically, urban—identity. These images and stories that Canadian Idol represents are not reflective of the whole complex reality of Canadian identity, even though the show frames itself as finding a representative of all Canadians.

In addition, the 2006 season of Canadian Idol employed specific global television codes and generic discourses to render invisible the procedures and practices that help manufacture a specific Canadian identity. According to Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray (2004), reality is produced via “editing, reconstruction, producer mediation, and prefab setting . . . [which have an impact] on the audience’s access to the real” (p. 5). Ouellette & Murray refer to reality television programming as representing an “entertaining real” (p. 4). In the Canadian context, the politics of identity expressed on shows such as Canadian Idol—whether of regional, territorial, and/or linguistic identity, or that of other silenced identity groups—offers a gold mine for social science and humanities research. The 2006 season of Canadian Idol is particularly rich for these reflections, especially on regional identity, as it brings to the fore debates centred on the two Canadian provinces, Québec and Newfoundland and Labrador. In the show’s regional carving up of the nation, the challenges faced by multiculturalism in a contemporary nation such as Canada are effaced, but never quite eliminated. Although Canadian Idol provides Canadians with a way to think about and make sense of their identity, the clues and traces of Canadian public opinion, as shown by the posting of messages by some viewers on the show’s message boards, indicate that not all viewers internalize, uncritically, the representation of identity as articulated by the show. Indeed, some respondents used the space provided by the Canadian Idol message boards to work through these very issues. In so doing,
their comments make manifest the general social framework of regional identity that, paradoxically, underlies a hegemonic understanding of the reality of the nation.

Notes
1. Wikipedia. (2007, December). It may also be noted that the Wikipedia online encyclopedia describes the television show *Canadian Idol* as “a reality television show on the Canadian television network CTV, based on the popular U.K. show *Pop Idol* and its counterpart *American Idol*. The show hosted by Ben Mulroney is a competition to find the most talented young singer in Canada.”

2. The notion of the “glocal” is used in this article to illustrate the linkages between global models of production (e.g., the genre of television: programming and/or format) and the representation of local cultural and political contexts (e.g., online discussion about “Newfies” or Québec separatism could only be fully understood within the local context of Canadian cultural politics).

3. Telus is a public phone company and is the only phone company that was associated with the 2006 season of *Canadian Idol*.

4. We recognize that some Canadians from rural regions are able to compete to be on the show, as they may travel to the urban audition locations. However, as auditions do not tend to be held in rural areas, this does prevent many Canadians living in smaller regions from auditioning for the show.

5. John Brunton and Barbara Bowlby (2006g). As per data (video clips) posted on the official *Canadian Idol* website. In addition, Byers (2008) noted similarly that *Canadian Idol* tends to privilege regional rather than national Canadian identity. She noted that during the show’s first season, contestant Jenny Gear was represented as a Newfoundlander and not as a Canadian.

References


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