

“I’m a Frog, You’re a Frog, Kiss Me”: A Commentary on Brayton and Alexander (2007)

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There is irony in my attempt to present a critique of Brayton and Alexander’s article (2007) to a largely English-speaking readership. Those who know me will figure out why. In any case, I am writing in this lovely summer of 2007, when the city of *Québec* is about to celebrate its 400th birthday, when Canada is celebrating 140 years of history, when the 40th anniversary of General de Gaulle’s infamous “*Vive le Québec libre*” is underlined, and when the *Québec* province is celebrating its 30th *Fête nationale*. This civic holiday was originally called *La Saint-Jean-Baptiste*, for the patron saint of French Canadians, but in 1977 the *Québec* national assembly renamed the holiday to make it more inclusive, to render obsolete the designation *Canadien français* and to encourage a de-ethnicized and progressive definition of the *Québécois* nation.

Plus ça change, plus c’est pareil . . . Amongst all of these defining identity moments, I was asked to translate the abstract of the Brayton and Alexander article and found myself in the uneasy situation of having to translate in antiquated *Canadien français* terms what I saw as a *Québécois* story contextualized and interpreted by English-speaking Canadians. I translated dutifully. As is said in the famous *Frog Song* written by Jean Chevrier and sang by Robert Charlebois, “I may not look good but I’m well raised and I don’t complain.” Well, not exactly. . . I was given the opportunity to write this commentary, so here it is.

In brief, Brayton and Alexander use the controversial frog logo of *Québec* City’s semiprofessional basketball team to explore irony as a reading strategy and a method of critique. These authors present team owner Réal Bourassa as a “subversive antihero” (p. 246) whose ironic use of the frog imagery encourages an alternative and presumably useful reading of mascot controversies. The authors conclude that perhaps the greatest asset of irony is “the extent to which it promotes cultural dialogue around potentially sensitive issues” (p. 255). After a careful consideration of their article, I have three main comments. First, Brayton and Alexander must be commended for approaching a difficult topic, for proposing the use of irony, for engaging in a theoretically rich discussion of irony and identity from a poststructuralist perspective, for their search of a new and progressive reading of mascot controversies, and for their goal of promoting cultural dialogue

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around sensitive issues related to sport. Second, said simply, irony has important limits. What is ironic and acceptable for some is not ironic and *is* rather insulting for others. Irony requires a cultural backdrop to be understood, and this backdrop is constantly changing so that understanding of the backdrop is always (slightly or way) ahead of the cultural interpreter. Because of the ever-present potential for misunderstanding and verbal injury, irony is an improper starting point for cultural dialogue, and this is particularly true between individuals who do not share the same language. Third, the terms, context, and arguments that sustain Brayton and Alexander's idea that the ironic use of the frog imagery is useful are presented in a way that works against the original goal of these authors. The rest of my commentary will be devoted to document this last charge.

***The Frog Song*¹**

Your butter is hard and your toasts are burned
 Your milk is sour and your egg yoke is burst
 There's no more hot water for your instant coffee

Chorus:

You're a frog, I'm a frog, kiss me,
 And I'll turn into a prince . . . suddenly!
 Give me peanuts and I'll sing *Alouette* without a sour note

Ironic self-representation is not new and neither are subversive political messages camouflaging as "harmless expressions of frivolity," (p. 253) to use the authors' terms. However, for Brayton and Alexander's argument (i.e., that Bourassa's ironic use of the frog imagery is helpful) to work, the reader must be convinced that Bourassa is a subversive hero who is willfully using the insulting frog imagery not only for profit-oriented reasons but also in an ironic way, that is, to promote rather than demean what the frog is known to represent. While the authors mention that "it is not [their] intent to celebrate Bourassa as an unlikely but subversive antihero" (p. 246), the bulk of their article presents him as a hero—or at least, this is one reading that seems to throw itself at the reader—while in light of information given in the last pages of their article, it could as easily be concluded that he is no such thing. For example, they state: "it is quite possible that Bourassa invoked irony to exempt himself from popular critique" (p. 254), "[Bourassa] once deferred responsibility [for the frog logo] to his marketing agents" (p. 254) and "this has given me [Bourassa] the most wonderful publicity I can imagine" (p. 255). Interestingly, too, Bourassa (or his marketers) asked people to choose between two unlikely team names: the Kebekwa and the Jumping Frogs. I may be well raised, but having heard it so often, I cannot but notice that this last name sounds very similar to the deplorable "fucking frog." Without the "jumping" precision, one would have known that frogs jump and so the implicit thesis that Bourassa is the promoter of all that is "French Canadian" just does not work. I would venture to say that the "irony" supposedly intended by Bourassa is all the more improbable because it would likely be lost on the team's young spectatorship as 96% of *Québec* city residents have French as their first (and most often only) language and that the insulting words heard in *Québec* city 30 years ago or still common today

in a cosmopolitan city like *Montréal* (where Bourassa comes from), are largely unknown to today's *Québec* city youth.

Seven fifteen you get on the bus
 Your "sight seeing tour" to get to work
 A nice trip in an organized group, like every morning
 (Chorus)

To understand irony, one needs to understand the context. I agree with Brayton and Alexander that "the frog is entangled in . . . colonialist history" (p. 242) and that to "contextualize the jumping frog discussion, one must be acquainted with French-Canadian history" (p. 242). The only disagreement I have with this last sentence is the singular form of the word history. As scholars of postmodernism and poststructuralism, Brayton and Alexander should have acknowledged their speaking position(s) and the fact that there is not one history of Québec and Canada but indeed many. In Canada, dominant historical discourses are written in English and tend to recolonize marginal "others." This appears to be the case for the two-page history provided by Brayton and Alexander. There is no time to present the multiple points of contention but let me provide a few examples.

First: While the colonialist endeavors of the French cannot be dismissed, it is inadmissible to summarize the early settlement of Québec by speaking of it as a project "that violently up-rooted the Iroquois First Nation well before the entrée of the British empire" (p. 243). Among other things, it takes account of neither the Iroquois Wars (with most other First Nations) nor the peaceful cohabitation and *métissage* (think of *coureurs des bois*, *métis*, *voyageurs*) generally characteristic of Aboriginal-French relations up to the fall of Acadia (1710) and New France (1760). This summary by Brayton and Alexander is all the more problematic because it contrasts with the authors' expression "British civilizing missions" (p. 243) in which the word *civilizing* is not placed within quotation marks, as well as the quasi silence about the British treatment of the "frogs."

Second: Brayton and Alexander describe the Quiet Revolution almost exclusively in economic terms (p. 243) and suggest that "[i]n the aftermath of the Quiet Revolution, disproportionate [sic] access to economic resources provided an ideal political setting for the emergence of René Lévesque's separatist Parti Québécois" (p. 243). This is a mischaracterization of the *révolution tranquille* because the latter was structural in nature but is mostly remembered for the high pace of its progressive reforms at the political, ideological, cultural, intellectual, educational, social, moral, religious, national, and linguistic levels. The same can be said for the emergence, actions, and essence of the *Parti Québécois (PQ)*. With regards to the essence, it is worth mentioning that the 1960s liberation nationalisms that were found in the wave of decolonization of (then called) Third World countries manifested itself in the emergence of many leftist and independentist movements in Québec: the *Alliance laurientienne*, the *Action socialiste pour l'indépendance du Québec*, the *Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale*, the *Parti républicain du Québec*, the *Ralliement national*, the *Mouvement souveraineté-association*. In contrast to those, the *PQ* favored political sovereignty (over separation and independence, an important and crucial difference to which the authors seem

oblivious) and advocated an association with Canada allowing an economic interdependence of the two national entities. Less radical than all leftist and independentist movements at the time, the *PQ* was not anticapitalist but looked to “humanize” capitalism through a social–democratic redistribution of wealth.

Third: Brayton and Alexander mention the *PQ*, which came to power in 1976, and then point out that “Language became an overarching concern during the 1960s when national issues of bilingualism and biculturalism reached a tipping point” (p. 243). I can identify with the problem of synthesizing a complicated history but find it perplexing that major events of the “language war” are glossed over, notably when the Canadian government sought to assuage Francophones by passing the 1969 Official Language Act, which required federal services to be offered in French and English, and when the Québec government upped the ante in 1973, making French the only official language of *Québec*. One reading of these omissions is that they would have rendered less palatable the authors’ thesis of “liberal federalism” pitted against “*Québec* nationalism” (p. 244) since the two major events cited above took place prior to the accession of a sovereigntist party to power in *Québec* and since Premier Robert Bourassa, head of the federalist and liberal party in *Québec*, promoted a form of *Québécois* nationalism that would safeguard the language and culture of the *Québec* majority, much to the disgust of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau who had been chosen by Canadian political elites for subduing the demands of *Québec* and organizing the repression of nationalist forces in *Québec*. Brayton and Alexander follow their mention of the *PQ* with this statement: “Trading on the nostalgia of early nationalists, the re-vision of Québec mythologized two incommensurable ‘races’ of people wedged uncomfortably at the center of Canadian society” (p. 243). I ask here: To whose re-vision are they referring? Who is speaking of races? I submit that the historical shortcut and interpretation favored by the authors neglect the profound changes to the meanings of the *we* and of *nationalism* in *Québec* (e.g., the *Canadien* nationalism of the *Patriotes*, the *Canadien français* nationalism of the ultramontane period, and the *Québécois* or “civic” nationalism starting in the 1960s). Shedding the ethnic and racist components that defined earlier nationalisms, the new cement of the 1960s nationalism was primarily constituted of civic and territorial elements added to the long-standing linguistic element.

Fourth: On page 343, Brayton and Alexander discuss the *Front de Libération du Québec* (*FLQ*) but present it in a way that does not take into account the various factions of the *FLQ*, all of which were for a denunciation of the oppression and exploitation of *Québécois* by American imperialism and the Canadian *bourgeoisie*, but most of which were against the use of violence to achieve their means. A majority of *FLQ* members agreed that armed violence would only benefit the established order that would use it as a pretext to repress the progressive forces. Sadly, they were right, and the terrible actions of a few individuals led to the incarceration of innocent civilians during the 1970 October Crisis as the War Measures Act was enacted by the Trudeau government not just to get the *FLQ* but to quell sovereigntists, independentists, separatists, and in brief, just about everyone suspected of *Québec* nationalism and especially union leaders whose nationalist ambitions were entangled with leftist rants against the all-too-common English-speaking boss denounced in the Charlebois song.

Your boss is tough, he travels during winter
 On the *Côte d'Azur* while he puts you out of work
 And the rest of the time he makes you work too hard but you don't
 complain
 (Chorus)

To agree with Brayton and Alexander's argument that Bourassa's ironic play with the frog imagery is useful, the reader is required to favor particular meanings of words such as *French Canadian*, *nation*, *nationalism*, and *multiculturalism*. With regards to the first term, it seems as though the authors' whole argument rests on its current existence in *Québec* even when *Québécois* have long ago chosen to let go of *Canadiens français* (see my first paragraph) because they recognized the multicultural aspect of the *Québec* nation. This stands in direct opposition to the authors' assertion that "a myopic nationalist paradigm in Québec failed to recognize the increasing importance of a multicultural agenda" (p. 244). The authors' use of the term French Canadian (when their reference to *Québec* seems to imply an "ethnic" meaning as opposed to a linguistic meaning as in *Franco-ontariens*, *Acadiens*, *Franco-manitobains*, *Franco-colombiens*, *Fransaskois* and other Francophones in Canada) is as problematic as that of the term French alone such as in "[the frog] is an anti-French icon" (p. 242), in "English and French relations in Canada" (p. 244) and in "ironic deployment of French stereotypes" (p. 245).

With respect to the second term, *nation*, I find the authors inconsistent in its use, which renders their argument quite confusing. While I agree with the authors that signs cannot be trusted because they fluctuate, they must be carefully situated to be useful. For example, Brayton and Alexander speak of "federalist contra nationalist" (p. 244). This phrase could refer to *Québec* federalists who oppose *Québec* nationalism, yet there are *Québec* federalists who favor a form of *Québec* nationalism and also Canadian federalists who promote certain types of Canadian nationalism. To which nationalism and which federalism are the authors referring? The same confusion occurs when the authors speak of a "national imaginary" (p. 242) since *Québec* is a nation that has its own dominant national imaginary, which is quite distinct from that of Canada. This slippage allows Canadian dominant national imaginary to become part of the authors' discursive construction of liberal federalism. More precisely, Brayton and Alexander specify that Canadian federalism has a liberalist agenda privileging "prima facie cultural diversity" (p. 244) and juxtapose this against *Québec* nationalism. While one could argue that *Québec* is no less liberal than the rest of Canada, my main question to the authors is: To which *Québec* nationalism are they referring? This fundamental question could be asked again when the authors propose that "Dunky the Frog also suggests the conscious negation of an authentic French Canadian identity mythologized as essential for Québec nationalism" (p. 245). Who is mythologizing here?

With respect to the last term, *multiculturalism*, one reading is that the authors identify with dominant discourse in Canada without making it explicit. The "multicultural agenda" (p. 244) is presented as progressive and inclusive, although the authors do acknowledge that in Canada the multiculturalism policy subsumed the *Québécois*. Again, meanings are not stable, and for many *Québécois* multiculturalism has rather meant a negation of the two nations giving Canada its original form: It basically meant a negation of *Québec*'s claim to national status, something

denounced even by *Québec* federalists such as Robert Bourassa. Contrary to the authors' suggestion (see p. 244), *Québec* did not adopt a policy of multiculturalism. Rather it recognized its multicultural aspect and adopted a policy of interculturalism that seeks to integrate immigrants into its mainstream on the basis of French, the language of the majority, as the common public language of all *Québécois*; all citizens are in this way invited to participate in a common civic culture. Interculturalism was also preferred to multiculturalism because many *Québécois* understood the latter as an encouragement to limit the freedom of minority members by forcing them into ethnic categories, by not integrating them linguistically into their new society, and by confining them to cultural and geographic ghettos. Finally, many cultural practices (e.g., excision, violence against women, homophobia) were seen as simply incompatible with *Québécois* common civic culture. This summer, *Québec* is actually inaugurating the Bouchard-Taylor Commission on the Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences; this commission is starting a vast consultation that will take place in 17 cities in *Québec* to discuss the integration of *néo-Québécois*, intercultural relations, civic culture, and *Québécois* identity.

Your wife looks bad and they treat you like an idiot
 Your youngest needs his nose wiped
 You may not look good but you're well raised, and you don't complain
 (Chorus and end)

Québécois identity is continuously changing, and so are its representations. Some are more ironic than others. I concur with Brayton and Alexander that "there is no magic wand of resignification that absolves the historical and ideological baggage of any particular sign," and that, in the end, "irony does not sound the death knell of ideology" (p. 254). It follows that the frog name and imagery resurrected for many *Québécois* the specter of long-standing English Canadian ideologies marking them as a French Canadian (ethnic) subject, with all of its negative connotations (e.g., consider the above lines of the Charlebois song). Does it matter that the public revival of the frog is the brainchild of a Bourassa as opposed to a Brown? Yes and no. Yes, because there are times when, to borrow Brayton and Alexander's term (pp. 251-252), the *ethnic* is permitted the right to use irony when voicing self-directed stereotypes or offering their visual representation—a right not afforded to others. No, because authorial intention is often unknowable, and ultimately what counts is not so much how the text is written but how it is read. As Derrida insists, every text is undecidable because it conceals conflicts between the text and the subtext. Readers, then, give the text its sense. A text offers meaning to the extent that the reader gives it subtextual and contextual meaning.

Reading of a text is thus unstable and context dependent. To come back to the frog issue, most *Québécois* would give meaning to the frog by first considering the context in which self-representation or -deprecation takes place. For instance, they would clearly distinguish between Charlebois singing a frog song at a *Fête nationale* public concert and an entrepreneur choosing a frog with an English name (Dunky) as a mascot for his professional sport team operating in an English-speaking league. The cultural backdrop for the actions of the Keb's team owner appears to have been rather clear to many *Québécois*—which is perhaps why we heard about it through the media—as well as to French-language bloggers. My own analysis of

the largest French-language blog (119 entries on Canoë) tells me that ironic intent or not, a majority of bloggers did not read irony and denounced the same derogatory connotations of the frog. Reactions went from considering Bourassa or *Québécois* in general as “colonized” or other similar epithets (40 entries), to disparaging the choice of the team name and ironically suggesting other self-deprecating names (24), to denouncing the choice of an English name (18), to suggesting that it is a minor sport/league and that the issue is not worth the debate (7), and suggesting that the strategy is simply good/bad marketing (6). Other bloggers were neutral (14 entries were to the effect that the frog did not bother them) and a few were rather positive about the name: 4 said they liked it, 2 said that Jumping Frogs meant positive qualities, and 4 said that laughing at oneself is fine. As for Brayton and Alexander’s finding that participants of the Canoë blog “sometimes used a Manichean grammar of ‘us against them’” (p. 249), I suppose that something must have been lost in translation since 95% of the entries I examined made no reference to English Canadians. Six entries did, but there was no “us against them” grammar from my own subjective position. Rather, three entries were to the effect that the frog was a bad choice since one would never see Anglophones call themselves “Jumping Square Heads” (a reference to *tête carrée*, an old derogatory term used by Francophones to insult Anglophones), and three entries were to the effect that the frog was a bad choice because it means an Anglophone insult to *Québécois*. My own analysis and that of Brayton and Alexander well illustrate how meanings are diverse, afloat, and how individuals, as well as their arguments, are situated and dis/empowered by certain discourses.

I agree with Brayton and Alexander when they stipulate that “Within the dominant ideologies of Canadian nationalism, for instance, one finds there is no sense of ‘Frenchness’ without ‘Englishness.’ . . . ‘Frenchness’ in Canada always contains a trace of what it is not—‘Englishness’” (p. 251). Indeed, long-standing Canadian ideologies tend to maintain and reproduce the English–French binary, whereby the nature of the first term is seen as dependent on and superior to the second. *Québécois* are certainly not shielded from these ideologies and many are interpellated by them. Since the 1960s, however, there has been a myriad of political gestures that reflect *Québécois*’ choice of self-defining in a way that subverts the dominant Canadian order, that de-ethnicizes their self-representation, and that reaffirms the civic nature of their nation. This explains in part why there were mixed reactions to the 2007 federal government’s approval of the motion, “Quebecois constitute a nation within a united Canada.” Many wondered about the motion’s consequences since they vary greatly according to whether one reads *nation* as an ethnic nation *à la* Trudeau or as a civic nation *à la* René Lévesque.

I bring these distinctions again to make it clear that the frog imagery and its discussion by Brayton and Alexander can only be understood within the terms and meanings of dominant Canadian discourses. For example, when the authors discuss the *Québec* city frog and state that “irony de-naturalizes the very situated claims to ‘French Canadianness’ from which the French Canadian is permitted to speak” (p. 251), the condition of reading irony this way is to adopt an “ethnic” understanding of the subject (as in French Canadian) and to agree that others, presumably French Canadians, will permit him to speak. Another example is when the authors speak of the same frog and imply that “used in a reflexive tone, [it] serves to distort the distinctions between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ representations” (p. 251). Here

the condition is to agree that there is an “authentic” representation of French Canadians. Finally, to understand Brayton and Alexander’s submission that, “The deployment of Dunky the Frog is, in some ways, an act of disidentification” (p. 250), the condition is that Réal Bourassa manipulate the terms of French Canadian subjectivity as defined by the dominant Canadian order, although this implies that both old and new terms would accommodate an ethnic understanding of French Canadian. These last three examples speak to the difficulty of thinking about such arguments outside the terms and meanings dominant in Canada. Within a *Québécois* paradigm, none of these examples make sense.

My deconstructive attempt at Brayton and Alexander’s article is too incomplete to provide a useful discussion of irony and identity and was rather meant to reveal the authors’ assumptions and contradictions while offering my own alternative and biased *Québécois* interpretations. I hope my commentary will be read as an invitation to continue writing about sport and issues of irony and identity because clearly such issues should be read and discussed from a diversity of speaking positions. The latter are crucial if we are to democratize and render more progressive the process and end results of our knowledge-production efforts in Sport Studies. Thus, in the spirit of the cultural exchange hoped for by Brayton and Alexander, let me temporarily agree with their reading of the frog as “a political negation of dichotomous identities in Canada” (p. 250) and then say: I’m a frog, you’re a frog, kiss me!

Notes

1. This 1976 song’s original title is in English, and so are the first two lines of the chorus. The rest of the lyrics are in French but appear throughout the present article in my own literal English translation.

Reference

Brayton, S., & Alexander, T. (2007). Dunky the frog and the politics of irony. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 24, 241-260.

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