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Elvis Gratton

Québec’s Contemporary Folk Hero?

Julie M-A LeBlanc

How can a fictional film character potentially be considered a Québécois folk hero in a contemporary narrative setting? The attempt to suggest or discuss the heroic nature of Robert (Bob) “Elvis” Gratton (affectionately known as Elvis Gratton), the Québécois film character and social political parody, is a daunting task because of the sheer oxymoron it represents. Though the very notion of Elvis Gratton as a folk hero in Québec seems unlikely to viewers of the film series, the character’s phenomenal status in popular Québécois culture makes it feasible to consider him that way. When I discussed my interpretation with potential participants in this research, many reacted in the same predictable manner: “You’re trying to discuss Elvis Gratton as a folk hero in Québec?” In response to their quizzical expressions, I outlined my hypotheses: proposing the rather unpromising character as a hero and perhaps antihero. These discussions provided me with a detailed approach to the topic during formal interviews online and in person. This essay recounts the points highlighted during the interviews and suggests viewing this popular film character as an invented satirical hero.

This character’s creation and life have become as important in contemporary media narratives as the romanticized legendary heroes of traditional lore. One may also characterize Elvis Gratton as what Richard Dorson calls a mass-culture hero. Dorson distinguishes between the folk hero, a character known and talked about locally or in an occupation, and the legendary hero, whose “fame spreads into subliterary channels, like county histories or chapbooks or dime novels, which enlarge the circle of his admirers through printed means but on levels close to folk groups and influential on local tradition” (1959, 199). He reserves a third category for the mass-culture hero, one whose existence and deeds are created by resort promoters, movie producers, or other forms of popular culture (199–200), as is the case with the character of Elvis Gratton. As
Dorson points out, few folk heroes exist in oral tradition. With Gratton, the categorical definitions of mass-culture and folk “hero” are blurred in cross-cultural perceptions and popular culture.

Over the past twenty years, the Elvis Gratton creators—film director Pierre Falardeau and actor Julien Poulin—have developed three “epic” films centered around the character’s parodic sociopolitical rants and slapstick humor. These films have been enormously popular with audiences since the first short film appeared in 1981. The film character charmed groups ranging from film critics to Falardeau and Poulin fans to parody lovers. Most Québécois know about the character Elvis Gratton and his impressive, albeit burlesque, life adventures.

Although some Elvis Gratton films have won praise from general crowds, various film festivals in other Canadian provinces such as Ontario, and English-speaking communities, they are chiefly geared toward French-speaking communities and the Québécois public in the hopes of jolting a political reaction, and perhaps inciting a social revolution. As a result, I decided to continue my research on heroes and antiheroes in narratives by showing how this unique character in Québécois cinema can ultimately be considered a contemporary folk hero/antihero.

Comparatively speaking, this film character may share a place within Québécois folklore similar to other legendary heroes in Québec’s narrative tradition such as Joseph “Jos” Montferrand or Ti-Jean. Elvis Gratton, a character who is known, talked about, and serves as an embodiment of social concerns shared by particular groups is presented as a stereotypical embodiment of popular (mis)conceptions.

In this chapter, I examine Elvis Gratton as the popular representation of class and nationalist expressions through published interviews with the films’ controversial director as well as personal interviews and one focus group. I also discuss the way an entertainment medium uses the image of the character implicitly and explicitly to promote socioeconomic and political reform and cultural changes for Québec.

Terms such as hero and antihero are defined from the perceptions of both the participants and authors who have used regional characters from the past as examples of national heroes. Works on the hero pattern and tradition by Lord Raglan ([1936] 2003) and Vladimir Propp ([1968] 2001) are supplemented with those by Horace P. Beck (1971) and Alan Dundes (1978) to support the discussion of heroic displays and their interpretations. I include Dundes’s criticism of Raglan’s and Propp’s theories to illustrate how comparative functionalist and structuralist studies can be applied to film narratives. While I do not
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base my entire study on Raglan’s and Propp’s early twentieth-century work, I do use their studies as a potential frame to extract similar elements about what makes up a hero, and, conversely, an antihero from Elvis Gratton. This research examines the atypical ways a hero may be conceived and created in contemporary narratives and illustrates how cinema as a folk transmitter is a visual stimulus in Québec’s contemporary narrative tradition.

Elvis Gratton: Who Is He?

Elvis Gratton is not a particularly handsome man, nor does he look like Elvis Presley, though he desperately tries to when impersonating him. This discrepancy explains why some of my participants felt using the term hero and Elvis Gratton in the same context was bizarre. As an unpromising hero, however, Elvis Gratton illustrates the effects of irrational political thought by becoming the satirical stereotype of a Canadian Federalist in Québec. In all three features, Gratton is challenged by Falardeau and Poulin’s personal conceptions of the stereotype and overcomes various obstacles but ultimately pays the consequences for an uninformed political opinion.

Falardeau introduced the character of Elvis Gratton to viewers across Québec in 1981 in a thirty-minute short film. The character instantly became popular, making it possible to create two more short films and combine them into a feature in 1985. The Elvis Gratton films circulated as bootleg copies, traveling from household to household. Those who knew the film character, either by word of mouth or viewing the early films, were initiated through family members or friends who asked them if they knew about the Elvis Gratton films. For some, the experience of watching the combined film, Elvis Gratton: le king des kings (1985), was like viewing any other cult film. Audience participation reaches an “event” form akin to watching The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975), where the viewer also experiences the performance of others who know the upcoming jokes either starting to laugh before them, or even saying the lines as the actors pronounce them on the screen. Watching the Elvis Gratton films creates a setting for mimicry. How many times have I heard the line, “Pasta Dental…Linda! C’est d’la pâte-à-dent!” (Pasta Dental…Linda! It’s toothpaste!), referring to a scene where Elvis Gratton’s wife, Linda (Denise Mercier), rubs toothpaste on his back thinking it is sunscreen. This scene, reenacted among Elvis Gratton fans, is as entertaining as the one that follows, where both actors are lobster red from sunburns. That fans react to the line without the visual stimulus
reveals an insider’s knowledge of the scene and reflects the shared experience and familiarity with the character.

The phenomenon surrounding the way the lines are repeated and how they affect viewers makes Elvis Gratton a popular legendary character in Québec. Insiders repeat these film lines when they refer to or acknowledge something or someone resembling Elvis Gratton. Some of my interviewees even stated that it was his stereotyped accent, one from Brossard, a south-shore suburb of Montréal, that made him more comical. Some of my interviewees described the accent as a “colon” or “habitant” accent, a derogatory term referring to either a member of a farming class of early colonial Québec, one with little or no education, or even a lower-class or social-welfare-type person. Although the character is quite successful in his hometown, the owner of a gros garage (“large automotive” garage), he is portrayed as a kitschy, blue-collar suburbanite impersonating Elvis Presley on weekends to entertain himself and the fans in his community. The character, also seen as a “redneck Québécois” (Claude Leblanc 2004), is almost too real to be fictitious, and the first films created a plausible image of a person someone might actually know. Both director and actor wished to transmit precisely this impression to viewers. The character was meant to convey the idea that he could very well be living in your neighborhood, could be one of your family members, a friend, or even you.

The problem with discussing this character as a hero is that although those who know him see him as a phenomenon, they do not necessarily regard him as a contemporary folk hero for the Québécois. As a result, I also tried to examine antihero as well as hero definitions to see whether a character that represents a form of social embarrassment and political criticism may function as both hero and antihero.

The Making of a Potential Hero

Over the course of six months, I interviewed, formally and informally, French and English Canadians on the subject of the Elvis Gratton films and how they perceived the works of Falardeau. I asked interviewees if they could define, in their own terms, hero and antihero with examples. In general, and in accordance with the data collected, they perceived a hero as a person who is admired and imitated; who has no moral, intellectual, or physical faults; who is capable of extraordinary accomplishments; who wins and makes significant contributions to the well-being of others even in dangerous situations; and who is honorable. Some of these qualities are in keeping with dictionary definitions, for example,
that a hero is brave and capable of great acts. According to Lord Raglan’s *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*, a hero can belong to a mythical as well as a historical period. His story is “altered to make [it] conform to a ritual pattern,” or he is someone in “whose [life] ritual played a predominant part” (2003, 186). Horace P. Beck comments that “Raglan, like most of the other writers, is talking about mythological, epic, or culture heroes” (1971, 122). Similar to Beck’s interest in what defines the “popular, national legendary heroes” (1971, 122), I approach Elvis Gratton as a popular, national, legendary hero with traits similar to those found in the structuralist works of Lord Raglan and Vladimir
Propp. I do acknowledge that some of Raglan’s and Propp’s characteristics should be applied tentatively, but they remain nonetheless valuable in developing a hero or antihero analysis in a contemporary narrative medium such as film.

While Raglan’s work enumerates twenty-two “features and incidents” that may reveal a hero ([1936] 2003, 174–75), Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* identifies thirty-one “functions of the dramatis personae” ([1968] 2001, 25–65) that illustrate how a folktale is developed. The absence of the hero’s death in Propp’s final functions was criticized by Alan Dundes in “The Hero Pattern and the Life of Jesus” (1978, 231) and is partially compensated for by Raglan’s final pattern element in the life of a hero. Although Dundes argued that Raglan and Propp’s functions apply to legends and folktales respectively, I have incorporated both structural approaches to examine briefly how it may be possible to analyze Elvis Gratton as a potential hero according to these patterns.

Raglan’s first to the eighth incidents, dealing with the hero’s origins and rearing, do not apply to Elvis Gratton because we receive limited genealogical information about the character other than what seems to be his native and current hometown, Brossard, Québec, Canada. Viewers are introduced to Elvis Gratton’s wife, Linda, and his brother-in-law, Méo (Yves Trudel), but are not given information on his birth and rearing. This factor is therefore part of the pattern element stated in Raglan’s ninth and tenth features, where “we are told nothing of his childhood, but on reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom” ([1936] 2003, 174). Elvis Gratton’s kingdom in the film can be loosely designated as both Brossard and the province of Québec.

In the first conglomerate film, Elvis Gratton impersonates Elvis Presley, wins first prize in a look-alike contest, and travels to a fictitious South American island named Santa Banana, ruled by a megalomaniac dwarf dictator named Général Augusto Ricochet (Reynald Fortin). A series of embarrassing events ensue, such as mistaking toothpaste for sunscreen, being sold a dead rat decorated as a beautiful native bird, listening to preregistered baseball games on the beach, and being completely ignorant that soldiers patrol the grounds to prevent contact between locals and visitors. Using Elvis Gratton’s vacation, the director and actor decided to play on the extreme stereotypes about the Québécois vacationer who travels to destinations such as Old Orchard Beach in Maine or even Cuba. One of my interviewees stated that Québec once had its own specific airline carrier specializing in such southern destinations and filled with “Elvis Grattons” (O’Leary 2004). Eventually, the carrier went bankrupt, but its vacation packages were similar
to all-inclusive ones sold by travel centers and airlines today. The image in the film portrays a relatively plump Québécois male in his Canadian-flag swimming trunks, wearing socks and sandals, and talking loudly in his native accent. These stereotypes have also been described to me by friends and acquaintances from Québec and the United States, who have seen these “Elvis Grattons” come to life in front of their eyes.

My interviewees had particular opinions about the image of the loud Elvis Gratton vacationer, stating that he lacked sophistication even though he thought he had some and that he reflected a particular social class that is often a basis for humor in Québec. For one interviewee, Elvis Gratton reflected the image of Canadian “snowbirds” who “envahissent ‘la Florida’ durant les mois d’hiver” (invade Florida during the winter months) (Charles 2004). This particular image was also projected in another comedy film, La Florida (1993), where one Québécois character sarcastically commented that his fellow native vacationers in Florida were “des coureurs-de-bois en Cadillac” (lumberjacks in Cadillacs). One male student from Québec City even told me that he thought Elvis Gratton was the archetype of the Québécois vacationer, although he did not personally know anyone who reminded him of the character (O’Connor 2004).

It is precisely for these stereotypical images that Falardeau and Poulin created the character of Elvis Gratton; Berger mentions that it is a common trait for screenwriters to draw on stereotypes which can ultimately “give readers and viewers of films and television shows distorted images of certain kinds of people” (1995, 160). Although the image of Elvis Gratton is not characteristic of a traditional hero, he plays that role in Québec’s popular culture and, according to Falardeau and Poulin, surfaces in the Québécois subconscious to awaken the dormant revolutionary that may live in them.

For one female student in Montréal, Elvis Gratton is the embodiment of the universal idiot (Cormier 2004). The general impression is that Elvis Gratton is grotesque, extreme, raw, and antiseparatist. Ultimately, Elvis Gratton does not embody the Québécois people as a whole; he represents all that is hated by separatists, one of many subpolitical groups in Québec. How then can Elvis Gratton qualify as a hero? Perhaps the character’s essence is not heroic according to the director’s views, but his popularity has made him legendary.

Looking further at Raglan’s heroic incidents, we can see the metaphors associated with heroic traits thirteen and fourteen when Elvis Gratton “becomes king….For a time he reigns uneventfully” ([1936] 2003, 175) in the King of Kings film. If we transfer these traits to a contemporary
setting and alter the long voyage taken by the traditional hero in Propp’s ninth function ([1968] 2001, 36–38), Elvis Gratton’s trip to Santa Banana changes his character significantly. As though being tested on his trip, and relevant to Propp’s eleventh and twelfth functions ([1968] 2001, 39–42), Elvis Gratton amusingly overcomes tourist traps as well as technological and physical obstacles, returns to his homeland and his garage in Montréal, and tries to remedy the political turmoil of Québec to fit a federalist agenda. Upon his return, Elvis Gratton’s political deeds are less than noble; he makes financial arrangements akin to bribery with the mayor of Montréal.2
In the first feature film, Elvis Gratton explicitly offers offensive opinions on socialism and critiques welfare, students, and the healthcare system in Québec. His monologue also describes separatism and the downfall of the independence movement in Québec. This behavior obviously reflects the satirical image Falardeau wishes to portray. Coincidentally, Elvis Gratton’s opinions and political influence may also be compared to Raglan’s fifteenth trait, that of the hero who “prescribes laws” ([1936] 2003, 175). Raglan’s sixteenth and eighteenth traits, where the hero “later…loses favour with the gods and/or his subjects, and…he meets a mysterious death” ([1936] 2003, 175) may be reflected in the way
Elvis Gratton creators Falardeau and Poulin took the roles of the gods in question and killed the hero in the first feature film.

Ironically, the less-than-perfect image of traditional heroes can make them even more likable, just as they may lose favor with gods or subjects in legends and tales. This is reinforced by Beck’s brief illustrative point that dishonesty in American heroes such as Davy Crockett and Ethan Allen was excusable because they both “cheated the cheatable” (1971, 128). Robin Hood is another example of a hero who performed a not-so-noble gesture such as stealing, but because he took from the rich and gave to the poor, it was excused as a necessary deed. The vigilante and rebellious nature of Robin Hood as an important antioppressive hero is what makes him virtuous (see Holt 1960; Keen 1961; and Raglan [1936] 2003, 45–53). The charismatic examples found in Davy Crockett, Ethan Allen, and Robin Hood may be compared to Elvis Gratton because they appear the same to those who admire noble heroes, for it is the notoriety of a character that often makes him larger than life. Elvis Gratton’s political role in the films would not die with the character in the first feature film. While Falardeau prepared other politicized films, Elvis Gratton merely slumbered.

The Politics Surrounding Elvis Gratton

Falardeau, as an independence-movement activist, created many political documentaries on the nature of Québécois politics and used this first fiction film as a social criticism about the need to reexamine independence causes leading to separation from Canada. The desired effect was to stimulate a cultural shock and possible revolution within the social, political, and cultural realms in Québec. Falardeau and Poulin’s Elvis Gratton was molded out of their frustration about the failed Québécois separation referendum of 1980 (LaFrance 1999, 74; Lussier 2004, 3; Bégin 2004, 120). In Pierre-Luc Bégin’s interviews with Falardeau, the film director clearly states his intentions about Elvis Gratton. In fact, the second film was specifically released in theaters on Canada Day (July 1), a planned event much in the essence of Falardeau’s philosophy, as he stated, “Faire mes films comme on pose des bombes” (making my films is just like placing bombs) (Bégin 2004, 85).

After reading Mireille LaFrance’s interviews in her book Pierre Falardeau persiste et filme! and viewing Falardeau and Poulin’s projects from the 1970s on, I learned just how political both artists were in their early stages as film director and soundman who constructed collages of media footage and metaphorical images to convey their political beliefs.
Looking at Falardeau’s filmography is like witnessing an evolution of social angst, artistic rebellion, and political reactivism toward a system that does not favor egalitarian hegemony, but rather a dominant, central, capitalist institution governing the entire nation. As a master’s student in anthropology, Falardeau was fascinated by works from Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes (LaFrance 1999, 17–22; Bégin 2004, 62–67, 204). Being a product of Québec’s Quiet Revolution and using what he had learned in anthropology, Falardeau envisioned his films as a way to express himself politically. As noted by Sherry B. Ortner in her 1984 compiled historical outlook, “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties,” the seventies saw a particular interest in symbolism in “class or group identity, in the context of political/economic struggles of one sort or another” (142). This resonated in Falardeau’s approach to cinema and his narrative development. With the help of Poulin, Falardeau was able to use what he had learned in anthropology and create a character that embodied social criticism.

Falardeau and Poulin’s personal political opinions have also often been discussed in the media. It was their strong opinions in their works together prior to the Elvis Gratton films that branded them as political activists within an artistic medium. Falardeau became a controversial film director with separatist, sociodemocratic ideals that bordered on cultural manifestos and were in keeping with left-wing nationalist movements. This ties in with the Elvis Gratton as hero or antihero debate since it was after the first screening of Elvis Gratton in 1981 that Falardeau and Poulin realized to what extent they had created a “monster.” Such a monster was specifically manifested in the second feature film, *Elvis Gratton II: Miracle à Memphi*is (Elvis Gratton II: Miracle in Memphis) (1999). After the first Elvis Gratton film won the award for best short fiction film at the Festival de Lille in 1982, and then a 1982 Genie Award in Toronto, Falardeau and Poulin sought to continue the adventures of the “héros national du bourrelet” (fat national hero).

Holy Gratton!

Elvis Gratton, a duly politicized character, also becomes a supernatural figure through this second film. He miraculously resurrects at the end of the first feature to continue spreading his notions of life and entertainment in the sequel. Elvis Gratton suffers a severe heart attack while performing in an Elvis sequined suit clearly too tight for him. The resurrection takes place during his funeral march; he bursts out of his coffin before the planned burial. In a way, the end of the first feature illustrates
Raglan’s twenty-first heroic pattern of the “body not buried” ([1936] 2003, 175). That Elvis Gratton resurrects three days after his death “like Jesus” (as noted in the film synopsis) is particularly significant. Though Elvis Gratton II appeared in theaters fourteen years after the release of the first feature in 1985, the sequel states that Elvis Gratton resurrected three days after his death and aged surprisingly quickly. However, the current events portrayed at the beginning of the sequel date from 1998, making the chronological explanation moot.

It can be argued that Elvis Gratton plays a similar supernatural role to that of Jesus, or even King Arthur, as a slumbering king or sleeping messiah/warrior (Raglan [1936] 2003, 41). The resurrection has parallels to the sleeping warrior motif, where “the story of the Sleeping Warriors is connected with a coronation ritual, a ritual intended to qualify the new king to impersonate the old king” (Raglan [1936] 2003, 42) and echoes Elvis Gratton’s return from death and reexamination of social issues in Québec. Viewers learn in this second film that Elvis Gratton will use his miraculous return to life as a commercial ploy to sell his own image in the entertainment and business worlds. Elvis Gratton resurrects like an allegorical hero and profits from this miracle to become the commercial “king des kings.” With the help of a wealthy corporate Texan mogul (Barry Blake) called Donald Bill Clinton or preferably D. Bill, Elvis Gratton creates items out of his image to sell to the masses. As an interesting play on words, D. Bill in French sounds like débile, meaning “stupid” or “idiotic,” which is yet another personal opinion Falardeau shares with his audience on wealthy tycoons and excessive commercialism.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the use of specific terms in French, to deride the English character in this case, illustrates the deeper level where Falardeau is encoding his opinions and the way viewers should decode them. Linguist Edward Sapir notes that a specific group decodes what they “experience” and its reference to their identity (1921, 12–13). In Alan Cruse’s Meaning in Language, this intention also shapes the way a sender’s message is conveyed, especially since in language “signs are the property of the speech community and have stable semantic properties” (2004, 6). Unless you are part of the French-speaking community and understand the thick jouale accent (Québécois slang) pouring out of Elvis Gratton’s mouth, you may not understand most of the linguistic derision in the script. The identifying markers and associative speech also confirm the specific audience Falardeau expects to view the films. The community of viewers must at least be initiated into the film’s language and meanings to understand the message.
Pierrette Thibault’s 1993 definition of sociolinguistics in the *Dictionnaire critique de la communication* describes the Labovian approach to linguistics, that is, acknowledging a community as having its own communication system subject to variations according to constructed identities (1993, 286). The variation of French represented by jouale is an example of the way language works in the Elvis Gratton films to draw in particular listeners and identify a specific group in Québec. Falardeau’s use of the Texan mogul to mock the excesses of commercialization is clear not only through his name D. Bill (débile) and what it conveys to French speakers but also through the way he capitalizes by marketing Elvis Gratton as a product.

Through the overblown marketing strategies implemented by D. Bill and his committee, as well as the ridiculous activities that mark Elvis Gratton’s own involvement in the campaign, Gratton experiences worldwide popularity, performs his own shows around the world, and sells personal products while advertising others at his shows. Even his Presley-like purple latex jumpsuit is plastered with product and company logos. This concern with commercialism becomes the main theme in the second feature film, one viewers also see expressed by other Canadians like Naomi Klein in her critiques of the corporate world and its name-branding phenomenon (Klein 2000).

**Elvis Gratton, the Puppet: Falardeau’s Voice and Criticism**

Falardeau always tries to convey social criticism in his films, and it is fitting that between the first conglomerate Elvis Gratton film and the second feature he kept his voice heard in Québécois popular politics by creating a series of serious films and documentaries. In his 1994 tragic drama, *Octobre*, he presented a version of Québec’s Quiet Revolution and the early 1970s assassination of Minister of Labor Pierre Laporte by members of the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) that provoked as strong a reaction as his previous films. The film and director received much attention from the media as well as politicians in Québec and other provinces in Canada, who felt this interpretation might have romanticized the image of a radical rebel group and their drastic measures for independence. Falardeau started the project research for the film *Octobre* in 1981 when Poulin was still very involved in its creation, but the film was only released to the public in 1994. Even though Falardeau’s timing seemed to be by chance, it perfectly aligned with the second referendum for separation in Québec, which took place one year after the release of *Octobre* on October 31, 1995. The day after the referendum echoed the
same sense of defeat and confusion that Falardeau remembered from 1980 (LaFrance 1999, 74).

After creating a short advertising commercial for the Yes campaign, Falardeau did what he knew best: create another film in response to the referendum failure. The public then witnessed the rebirth of Elvis Gratton in 1999 through *Elvis Gratton II: Miracle à Memphis*. This rebirth, in keeping with the metaphorical awakening of the slumbering king, served as a political reminder for Québec. It represented Falardeau’s own serious attempt to stimulate historical events leading to a possible new order in Québec.

Since 1990, Falardeau had wanted to direct a project on the final letters of the Chevalier de Lorimier, a Patriote who was executed in 1839 for rebelling against the British crown’s neglect to govern those inhabiting Lower Canada (the province of Québec today) responsibly. The Patriotes were also present in Upper Canada (parts of the present provinces of Ontario and Québec), but what interested Falardeau was representing a common Québécois political movement. It was during LaFrance’s interviews with Falardeau that he shared his views of national heroes in Québec, and the irony that de Lorimier, the hero of his film *15 février 1839* (2001), was a martyr, hanged for his political beliefs, became apparent. The actor who portrayed de Lorimier, Luc Picard, was the same person who played Francis Simard, the FLQ member involved in the assassination of Pierre Laporte in the film *Octobre*. As though recycling these serious images, Falardeau chose Luc Picard as the hero for his political tragedy and Julien Poulin as the one in his political satire.

**Is Elvis Gratton a Hero or an Antihero?**

Compared with other heroes in Québec’s legend tradition, such as the southwestern Québécois strongman Joseph “Jos” Montferrand, or even the cunning and shrewd Ti-Jean (Little John) who outwits the colonial British, Elvis Gratton may not seem as directly heroic. When I interviewed people and asked them whom they considered to be a hero, some named religious figures like Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, or one of the saints; some suggested mythological heroes such as Hercules and Ulysses; others offered comic characters such as Superman, Lucky Luke, Tintin, and Astérix; sports fans even mentioned hockey player Maurice Richard and basketball star Michael Jordan. One interviewee named Québec’s popular past prime minister, René Lévesque (from the Parti Québécois).

I was intrigued to learn my interviewees’ definitions of antihero and the examples they gave to counterbalance certain qualities of Elvis
Elvis Gratton. Julie said that an antihero “atteint, par le hazard des choses, un but meilleur que le sort qui lui était destiné. La population le supporte parce qu’il démontre des caractéristiques humaines qu’on ne veut mettre en évidence” (obtains, by chance, his goal, which is greater than what is truly destined to him. The population supports him because he demonstrates human traits that they do not wish to place in evidence) (Hamel 2004). Derry felt that the antihero shows his “faiblesses, c’est la personne que l’on ne veut pas être mais, à un certain moment, on prend tout de même sa part puisqu’il est ce qu’il est. L’anti-héros est le ‘born-losers’ mais on l’encourage pareil” (weaknesses, is someone whom we do not wish to be, but at times, we support him because he is what he is. The antihero is a born loser, but we still encourage him) (O’Connor 2004). Other interviewees commented that the antihero does things out of his own interests and may put other people’s lives in danger, which is neither idolized nor idealized.

Examples offered as antiheroes were as various as the ones for heroes and some were even exact opposites when the interviewees thought that an antihero is contrary to a hero. In the political realm, Hitler, Stalin, and George W. Bush were mentioned; for comic characters, Captain Hadock in Tintin, Obélix in Astérix, Gaston Lagaffe, Charlie Brown, Andy Capp, and Wile E. Coyote were proposed. Julie thought that Elvis Gratton is an antihero much like the characters from the Québécois garage-hockey-league film series Les Boys I, II, III (1997, 1998, 2001), as well as those from a similar older film, Slap Shot (1977). Julie continued by stating that Elvis Gratton is an antihero because “le destin est plutôt un résultat de chance et Elvis se présente avec son personnage quotidien et cru” (his destiny is more of a chance result, and Elvis is a raw and everyday man) (Hamel 2004). Derry also considered Elvis Gratton to be an antihero because he is “tout ce qu’on ne veut pas être, mais, en même temps, on se reconnaît en lui et ça nous fait rire” (everything we do not wish to be, but at the same time, we find ourselves in him and that makes us laugh) (O’Connor 2004). This, in fact, represents satirical admiration for the character, making Elvis Gratton a potential antihero but a hero as well, though an unpromising one in terms of political revolutions. Derry continued,

Falardeau a probablement eu l’idée de montrer c’est quoi un hosti de raciste, cheesy, réactionnaire, fédéraliste, pro-Américain fétichiste..., mais ça a rebondi un peu aussi parce qu’Elvis n’a pas motivé les gens de changer, il a servi un peu comme une célébration de tout ce qui était, et est, un peu backwards au Québec (et partout dans l’occident peut-être) [Falardeau probably had the
idea to show what is a “host” (expletive colloquial term similar to damn) racist, cheesy, reactionary, federalist, pro-American fetishist..., but it bounced back a bit because Elvis did not motivate people to change; he served...as a celebration of all that was and is a bit backwards in Québec (and probably everywhere in the Western world too)]. (O’Connor 2004)

This politicized answer showed that people understood what Falardeau wished to convey through the character, but at the same time, he created a popular cult phenomenon beyond his own political messages.

Some interviewees saw Elvis Gratton as neither hero nor antihero (Giroux 2004; Charles 2004). One of them mentioned that Elvis Gratton is simply a caricatured image like Homer Simpson and Falardeau is himself an antihero because he “se sert de ses films pour inciter les Québécois à supporter la cause séparatiste en essayant de créer une perception de ceux qui ne la supporte pas comme étant des colons stupides ou des impérialistes brutal” (uses his films to incite the Québécois to support the separatist cause trying to create a perception of those who do not support the cause as stupid colonials or brutish imperialists) (Charles 2004). This is precisely the reaction Falardeau wishes to provoke when portraying the amusing, but ill-informed, Elvis Gratton.

Falardeau, quoted in a special film booklet featured in the daily Montreal newspaper Journal de Montréal, observed that the slapstick humor was not easy to create, but that “tout est dans la manière. Parce qu’Elvis, c’est de la caricature. C’est grotesque. C’est gros comme personage” (all is in the way [it is made]. Because Elvis is a caricature. It is grotesque. It is big for a character) (Rezzonico 2004, 44). In another issue of the Journal de Montréal, a journalist stated that “on rit de lui parce qu’il est une caricature ambulante, une espèce de concentré de tout ce qu’on peut trouver de pire dans l’homo Québecus” (we laugh at him [Elvis Gratton] because he is a walking caricature, a concentrated species of all that we can possibly find worse in the homo Québecus) (Langlois 2004, 67).

This particular caricature and provocation continued in the sequels. On June 23, 2004, one day before Québec’s provincial celebration of St-Jean-Baptiste, the third film, Elvis Gratton XXX: La vengeance d’Elvis Wong (Elvis Gratton XXX: The Revenge of Elvis Wong) was released. On June 30, one day before the Canada Day celebrations, I headed to Starcité (a large Famous Players multiplex cinema) in Hull, Québec, to view the film with family members and interview them for comments, reactions, and interpretations. I also watched the audience’s reactions. The theater seated approximately 250 viewers, and I roughly counted 85 in the room. Fewer than 10 viewers were teenagers, and approximately
20 were between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. The target audience for this film was largely those who had seen the previous Elvis Gratton films, that is, those who were between twenty and forty in the early 1980s. That particular group was predominant in the theater. Once the film started rolling, the physical and recurring jokes from previous Elvis Gratton films made people howl with laughter. However, Falardeau’s explicit attack on the media, featuring images of mass-media influence, its manipulation of the public, and its lack of factual information, and his treatment of censorship issues were not as appreciated by viewers. They responded to the slapstick humor, but the highly political messages Falardeau sent through Elvis Gratton and the character’s appropriation of a national broadcasting corporation were not as popular. During my family’s focus-group interview following the film, they all said they thought the political messages were overdone, and they were disappointed the film took such a propagandist approach (Claude Leblanc 2004; Marc-André LeBlanc 2004; Nadeau 2004; Westphalen 2004).

During an interview, Falardeau mentioned that he was aware of the disappointment some felt because of the evolution of Gratton’s character since the second feature (Légaré 2004, 26–29 passim). Falardeau recently shared his reflections on the various audience members who view his films and their reactions. When interviewed by Montréal’s daily newspaper La Presse, he stated, “C’est pas grave. Il y a des comedies que j’ai vues très jeune, qui m’ont fait rire, et dont j’ai compris la signification beaucoup plus tard” (It’s not important. There are comedies that I have seen at a very young age that made me laugh and that I understood the meaning much later [in life]) (Lussier 2004, 3). This is perhaps the reaction he was hoping to get from those who saw the third Elvis Gratton film. There are some interpretations that may still be left to our imaginations.

The message in the Elvis Gratton films is simple: if you know someone like Elvis Gratton, don’t be like him, but rather learn from his behavior. Falardeau’s political message serves as a lesson and wake-up call about the troubles of cultural assimilation in Québec since the colonial period. Elvis Gratton, perhaps not the best hero example, is a character who fulfills a similar role as a hero, but through negative reinforcement.

Elvis Gratton: The Phenomenon

As for his popularity, can it be that Elvis Gratton’s success is due to the consumers who buy into the Gratton image and see a piece of him in themselves? Falardeau and Poulin show this common man, the little bourgeois from a metropolitan suburb, suddenly seeking and finding
international fame. Slews of people who have seen the films in various stages of their lives can retell events, scenes, or even sayings from the main character that relate to the stereotypes and parodies.

This reaction to the popular character brings up identity issues that surround a particular group. Alan Dundes discusses various definitions of identity that are tied to sameness and continuity in groups (1983, 237–39), and Thomas Meyer describes a phenomenon of identity that may be related to Elvis Gratton. Meyer’s definition of identity as “an open process of negotiation between the self-image that the individual conjures up of himself and the image that his partners in social interaction form of him in changing contexts” (2001, 15) applies to Elvis Gratton’s image as a Federalist who questions the very motives of separatism and cultural distinction in Québec. Falardeau’s opinions of Federalists are reflected through Elvis Gratton. By using a Federalist satirical character, Falardeau differentiates between those who question the imposed political system versus those who follow it blindly in Québec.

The third film takes a different political approach by directly attacking the media. The political concerns are stretched to address freedom of speech and the mediated, controlled national broadcast system. The film’s distributor, Christal Films, refused prescreenings to the media; in consequence, film posters, chronicles, interviews, Web site advertisements, and television rebroadcastings of the other two Elvis Gratton features took place in the weeks prior to the release of the third film. Elvis Gratton had never seen such publicity or intriguing attention from the masses and the media. Ironically, the third film ridicules this very same media that promoted its release. At the end of the film, after Elvis Gratton’s second superdeath, we see a scene of his “selected” wife bearing his cloned child. This obviously opens the door for a fourth Elvis Gratton film, but how will this character evolve from the original? Will there be a difference, or has the initial character finished his transformation into his supernatural perpetuity?

This very politically incorrect film did not appeal to every viewer, but its success is not based entirely on viewers’ critiques; rather it exposes the immortality of the character. Some viewers complained about the explicit messages about exploitation by the media and felt that the Elvis Gratton films had degenerated into a less subtle form of satire. The director’s direct and raw personal frustrations left little to the imagination. Overall, Falardeau’s concerns always remain explicit through his character, Elvis Gratton, even if the content of the films may seem excessive.
Conclusion

In retrospect, trying to explore Elvis Gratton as a contemporary folk hero made me reconsider the definitions of hero and antihero as well as the populist perception of Falardeau and Poulin’s creation. After continuously watching the films, I rediscovered more clues that had led to my preliminary hypotheses about Gratton and hero cultures. What was striking about the first Elvis Gratton feature was the mayor’s condolence speech at Gratton’s Christmas wake. While the stiff, dead Elvis poses with a “hang-loose” finger gesture, his weeping wife, Linda, is consoled by the mayor’s eulogy:

La mort de votre mari, c’est une perte immense pour notre ville. C’est un homme irremplaçable, il s’est dévoué pendant des années pour les pauvres, les riches, les malades, il a toujours donné le meilleur de lui-même. Il laisse derrière lui de nombreux accomplissements et pour nous qui cherchons des exemples héroïques dans une société en bouleversement, Robert Gratton restera à jamais un monument pour les générations à venir. Mme Gratton, mes sincères condoléances. [The death of your husband is a great loss for our city. He is an irreplaceable man. He devoted himself for many years to the poor, the rich, as well as the sick and always gave the best of himself. He leaves behind him numerous accomplishments and for those of us who are searching for heroic examples in a changing society, Robert Gratton will forever remain a monument for generations to come. Mrs. Gratton, my sincere condolences.]

Ironically, Elvis Gratton did nothing for the poor, or the sick, but rather idolized the rich and famous as well as all that was glamorous, as one interviewee told me. Elvis Gratton did, however, become a popular icon because his cult films attracted the same public they had in the past plus a few additional viewers who had heard of the legendary character. Through laughter, Elvis Gratton managed to communicate the message intended by Falardeau and Poulin: to reexamine ourselves continuously and change what we can. His films may create the reaction needed to jolt a Québécois toward political reform. They may also remind viewers of the apathetic response some have toward cultural assimilation or may simply act like any other political satire and offer comic relief.

If any conclusion should be drawn on the subject of Elvis Gratton as a contemporary folk hero in Québec, it is that the question mark following this speculation reflects the people’s own views of the character as unpromising hero, as antihero, as caricature, and as none of these. Elvis Gratton is the everyman, the underdog, but the one who manages to
reappear every so often after political debates about separation in Québec. Elvis Gratton is a man who occasionally appears at political conventions and universities in full Elvis Presley garb, and who survives his own legend. Falardeau and Poulin created Elvis Gratton, the character who would not die, the figure of cultural irony who “thinks big”!

What would Québec do without Elvis Gratton? Perhaps this will be the question raised in the potential fourth Elvis Gratton film? Who knows if Elvis Gratton’s clone will continue the pseudohero tradition? Although some may not consider Elvis Gratton to be a folk hero like Jos Montferrand or Ti-Jean in Québécois legends, he does share their supernatural hero traits. Comparatively speaking, these characters share the fundamental role of folk hero, that is, a character who is known by groups, is talked about, and is an embodiment of concerns and social focus shared by these groups.

Elvis Gratton may not embody the desired and aspired values of a community according to his creators, but he does reflect the fears and shallow imperfections that may obsess the contemporary Québécois. Through this character, Québec may laugh at itself and reflect on these stereotypes that are shared and believed to be true by Québécois and Canadians. Examples of other films using satirical and stereotyped images in derision to criticize or create a sense of familiarity that compare to the Elvis Gratton genre are Michael Moore’s Canadian Bacon (1995) and Mike Clattenberg’s Trailer Park Boys: The Movie (2006). While Moore’s Bud Boomer (John Candy) resembles Elvis Gratton behaviorally, the Trailer Park Boys: The Movie is English Canada’s equivalent to the Elvis Gratton popular phenomenon. The characters are so vividly portrayed that they inevitably become popular with viewers. They achieve an epitome of notoriety, a quality associated with heroes.

If the interpretations provided by those I interviewed, as well as the ones from the published interviews with Falardeau, offer anything, it is that the character of Elvis Gratton has a place next to other heroes in having a potential influence and playing a role in contemporary Québécois folklore due to his surpassing popularity among a cross-generational group of viewers. Those who share stories from the films with some who have yet to see them perpetuate the cult among a greater body of potential viewers. From Québec to other provinces in Canada, and even to international places, Elvis Gratton travels farther than his film box. He is alive and well and may even reside next to someone you know. As one reporter from Montréal observed, “Elvis Gratton est au cinéma du Québec ce que la poutine est à sa gastronomie” (Elvis Gratton is to Québec’s cinema as poutine is to its gastronomy) (Rezzonico 2004, 44).
Notes

This paper was initially presented at the twenty-second Perspectives on Contemporary Legend conference in Aberystwyth, Wales, on July 21, 2004.

1. Méo has become increasingly important in the second and third Elvis Gratton films, and during the June 30, 2004, focus-group interview, Marc-André LeBlanc noted that Méo may possibly represent the voice of the Québécois people slowly and assertively being heard and understood in the films as a counterbalance to Elvis Gratton’s excessively Federalist comments.

2. This type of political and cultural endorsement has long since been an issue of great concern in Canada. In light of current affairs in Canada and as an interesting comparative example, the Liberal Party experienced serious allegations and consequent trials from the sponsorship scandals, whereby contractual work with companies created a budgetary double-dipping advantage for the party.

3. I am using the concept of Jesus as folk hero in a similar way as folklorists such as Alan Dundes (1978, 223–70) in comparing him to Elvis Gratton based on the allegorical and metaphorical portrayal implied by film director Pierre Falardeau.

4. Poutine, a mixture of fries, cheese curds, and gravy, is a conventional and subcultural dish as worth a try as viewing the Elvis Gratton epics.

Filmography

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). 100 min. Jim Sharman
*Trailer Park Boys: The Movie* (2006). 95 min. Mike Clattenberg
Works Cited


