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Television Nations: Imagined Communities in the Simpsons

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Abstract

Since debuting in 1989, The Simpsons has become a much-loved and studied television program. In every episode, the series deals with a variety of issues in sharp self-conscious satirical style. This paper responds to a call from Michael Billig for academic work examining the appearance of banal nationalism in popular culture (1995). The study is strongly informed by the process of imagining nations identified by Benedict Anderson (1991). It also draws on work by Edward Said (1978) and Stuart Hall (1997). The method and form of imagining and representing nations in The Simpsons is established and analysed. The dominant presence of the United States is also addressed. It is argued that there are evident and inherent politics of exclusion in the practice of representing nations, and this practice extends to The Simpsons as it does to other media. This paper establishes seven elements of nation that can be found in The Simpsons: name; flag; territory/place; gastronomy; national days; historical events; and national institutions. These elements are mapped through a detailed content analysis supplemented by a structuralist discourse analysis. It is laid out in five chapters, covering an introductory section, a comprehensive literature review, a methodological outline, a results and discussion chapter, followed by a concluding section.

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of the requirements for the award of the degree
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by

TRAVIS HOLLAND, BCMS, BA

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2012

SYNOPSIS

Since debuting in 1989, *The Simpsons* has become a much-loved and studied television program. In every episode, the series deals with a variety of issues in sharp self-conscious satirical style. This paper responds to a call from Michael Billig for academic work examining the appearance of banal nationalism in popular culture (1995). The study is strongly informed by the process of imagining nations identified by Benedict Anderson (1991). It also draws on work by Edward Said (1978) and Stuart Hall (1997). The method and form of imagining and representing nations in *The Simpsons* is established and analysed. The dominant presence of the United States is also addressed. It is argued that there are evident and inherent politics of exclusion in the practice of representing nations, and this practice extends to *The Simpsons* as it does to other media.

This paper establishes seven elements of nation that can be found in *The Simpsons*: name; flag; territory/place; gastronomy; national days; historical events; and national institutions. These elements are mapped through a detailed content analysis supplemented by a structuralist discourse analysis. It is laid out in five chapters, covering an introductory section, a comprehensive literature review, a methodological outline, a results and discussion chapter, followed by a concluding section.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis is entirely my own work except where I have given full documented references to the work of others, and that the material contained in this thesis has not been submitted for formal assessment in any formal course and the word length is 20,169 words.

TRAVIS HOLLAND

24/10/2012

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Well, this certainly seems odd, but, hey, who am I to question the work of the Almighty? Oh, we thank you Lord for this mighty fine intelligent design! Good job!

- Ned Flanders, 'The Simpsons Movie'

As much as Ned Flanders might disagree, there is rarely only one being involved with the creation of anything worth being thankful for. Ned failed to notice that the multiple-eyed purple squirrel he talks about in the quote above was the product of a whole heap of (toxic) stuff being spewed out into the atmosphere and mixing with some pre-existing elements. This work started as a bunch of ideas in my head about the role of 'the media' (that big amorphous conceptual beast that no-one can quite define) in shaping ideas about other big concepts. Without giving 'the media' too much credit for their role in establishing and contesting such concepts, it does seem that many people take strong heed of the content produced. One of my favourite media artifacts is, of course, *The Simpsons*, and it then seemed logical to ask some questions about what Springfield had to say about the world. Thankfully, I found in Dr Dean Chan a supervisor who was very happy to guide me through those questions, usually by asking well chosen and carefully worded questions of his own. My thoughts poured out onto paper and, like the waste from the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant, mixed up with other stuff that was lying around. Somehow, it flowed through the work of those scholars of nation who have meant so much to the theoretical frameworks in this project. Through the whole process, Dean was there to mop it up and keep it flowing away from disaster. Without Dean, and not to labour the analogy too much, I would have been like Rainier Wolfcastle flailing about while several tons of sulfuric acid raced toward him in the episode *Radioactive Man*. The

goggles would have done nothing. For his support and guidance, Dean has my gratitude and thanks.

Thanks also to my partner Meghan. Like a Marge to my Homer, she has been a long-suffering party to my schemes and ideas, no matter how half-thought and risky they seem. She has supported me financially, emotionally and academically in this endeavour and I hope the result is worth it for her sake at least as much as mine.

Finally, thanks also to my family. My brother, parents and grandparents have always been there for me and I would not have been able to achieve half as much without their love and support. In particular, my grandmother Olive has always encouraged me in every aspect of my life. She has been my safety net when needed, and I am sure it was our many Scrabble matches and debates that have taught me to think critically and carefully. I could not have had better training for this project. I am sure that when she tried to stop me watching *The Simpsons* as a kid, she would not have dreamed that I might have made as much use of it as I have.

ABSTRACT

When Benedict Anderson proposed the nation as “an imagined political community” (1991, p. 6), he established a central role for mass communication tools and methods in that imagining process. His arguments were underlined also by nation as a limited entity, which means that beyond the borders of each nation lay other nations. The nation was as much a reflexive imagining as a positive one, in that it was defined in opposition to other nations as much by what it inherently was. This study extends this notion to argue that a core aspect of the representation of any nation is its opposition or exclusion of outsiders. The tropes of nation identified by Anderson have persisted into fictional television and the American television series *The Simpsons* is no exception. For a show that is ostensibly about small town life, *The Simpsons* is full of representations of nation. Many of these fit neatly into Michael Billig’s conception of banal or everyday nationalism (1995). Further, there are a number of characters presented as outsiders, as Edward Said’s seminal “other” (1978). By examining the representations of eight different nations throughout the first ten seasons of the show, the method and form of their imagining, including the inherent politics of exclusion is established. The key research questions answered in this paper focus on the construction of notions of nation in *The Simpsons* and the ways in which characters are constructed as American or non-American.

Five key symbolic elements in the representation of nation are identified from relevant literature, namely national days, flags, gastronomy, territory and language. These are supplemented with another practical marker of any nation - its name. These six symbolic elements cover a range of ideas about constructions of nation and provide a rounded view of nations through which their appearance in *The Simpsons* is analysed. A comprehensive 10-season, 226-episode content analysis was conducted in search of appearances of these six elements. Other elements of

representations of nation manifested themselves during this content analysis, particularly historical events and national institutions. Following the initial content analysis, a detailed discourse analysis provided significant qualitative data to complement the findings from the quantitative data analysis.

This study demonstrates that ontologies of nation in *The Simpsons* are indeed constructed primarily by representations of the five symbolic elements identified from the literature, and that historical events and national institutions are also important. It is shown that the politics of exclusion and othering are clear in representations of particular characters and that most non-American nations represented in *The Simpsons* are objects of self-referential ridicule, where the show's creators seem to be highlighting their audience's own prejudices rather than indulging or presenting new versions of them. Meanwhile, American nationhood is strongly positioned as a banal norm.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In many ways, *The Simpsons* defies any sort of neat theoretical framework. For a show written by “Harvard geeks” (Angell 1993), it does very well with many of the world’s mass publics (Turner 2012). It is a cartoon, but arguably not for children. Bart is problem child and Homer is an absent father, yet they also represent the conservative middle American nuclear family (Cantor 1999). The Simpson family often struggles for money but they are also well travelled and can afford for Marge not to work. Their town, Springfield, has everything it needs to be simultaneously self-contained and yet connected to the outside world. Kent Brockman, a newsman who lives in the family’s neighbourhood, delivers the town’s evening news. Principal Skinner tells his Springfield Elementary students in *Lisa on Ice* (6.8¹), “grades are at an all time low”, and yet the town has two universities. Springfield’s citizens are notoriously reactive, as evidenced by their wholehearted embrace of the smooth-talking monorail salesman Lyle Lanley in *Marge vs. the Monorail* (4.12). Springfield is small-town, but in a big town kind of way. It has an international airport, a well-utilised harbour, and interstate railways and highways. The headquarters of the international television conglomerate Itchy & Scratchy Publishing are located in Springfield, as is the chief brewery of Duff Beer. After moving in across the road from the Simpsons, former first lady Barbara Bush says Springfield has the “lowest voter turnout in America” (*Two Bad Neighbors*, 7.13), and yet in *Bart Gets an Elephant* (5.17), both the Democratic and Republican national conventions are held in Springfield, and the American President regularly comes to town. So Springfield is worldly and cloistered at the same time.

¹ Episodes are referred to by their title and a number that includes season and episode number within the season, joined by a decimal point. In this case, *Lisa on Ice* is episode 8 in season 6, thus 6.8.

The Simpsons debuted in 1989 and has become America's longest-running animated television series (Turner, 2012). Along the way, it has addressed many complex social issues. Within the show are numerous characters representative of groups of individuals within American society, including many that could be characterised as outsiders or 'others'. Many one-off characters – both inside America and outside it – who can also be described as outsiders supplement the recurring cast. This study traces the appearance of the nation in this archetypal late twentieth century television program, developing Benedict Anderson's theory of nations as imagined communities and drawing upon Michael Billig's theory of banal or everyday nationalism. Billig crucially points to the need for more thorough investigations of banal nationalism, including "the extent of flaggings in different domains, and in different nations" (1995, p. 175). In response, Skey notes a variety of scholars are "now focusing on the (re) production, dissemination and negotiation of the national through routine texts and practices" (2009, p. 331). However, it seems none of these studies have addressed so closely and carefully a single influential text like *The Simpsons*. This study fits into this gap. Springfield's residents are exclusionary, opting to kick out all 'illegal' immigrants rather than pay a new tax in *Much Apu About Nothing* (7.23). Yet some of the town's most well known residents have non-American national origins. These contradictions are fertile ground for detailed investigations into the show's social politics, including its practice of imagining national communities.

This study is located at the intersection of nation and nationalism, but situated firmly in Springfield. It finds those nationalistic representations of nation in *The Simpsons* and teases them out, highlighting the inherent politics of exclusion in the process of representing nations. To demonstrate the appearance of such exclusion, the project addresses ways in which *The Simpsons* imagines both American and non-American national communities. It engages also in debates about how particular characters are 'othered', or presented as somehow different (and deviant)

from the 'mainstream' American community. The interest here is not to examine national identity as it appears in *The Simpsons*, but conceptions of nation itself through representations of particular nations in the show. Nation is a highly contested and problematic term because "no satisfactory criterion can be discovered for deciding which of the many human collectivities should be labeled in this way" (Hobsbawm, 1992, p. 5). As such, it is not the concept of nation that is under interrogation here, but its particular representation in the show. Anderson argues that representation is antecedent to existence in any case. The characteristics, organs and symbols of the nation-state as portrayed in *The Simpsons* are the main focus in this study, while certain characters are shown to be representative of their affiliated nations. This study is not an attempt to de-sacralise nationhood; nor is it an acceptance of naturalised national identity. It is a study of a particular conception of nationhood, as constructed through complex, layered iconography and allusion in *The Simpsons*.

Following this line of enquiry, this project is committed to an exploration of the manifest content in the show through two interrelated research questions:

1. How are notions of nation constructed in *The Simpsons*?
2. How are characters constructed as American or non-American in *The Simpsons*?

The first question seeks to establish what conceptions of nations are present in *The Simpsons*, and how tropes and symbols are employed to construct such conceptions. This is the overarching question, and it assumes conceptions of nations *are* constructed. Nonetheless, the data collected demonstrates that such constructions are indeed present. The representation of both American nationhood and other nationhoods can be interrogated collectively through the manifest audio and visual content in the show.

The second question assumes a binary positioning of American characters compared to non-American characters. It is testing the hypothesis that nation is constructed partially through representation of characters that are shown to be affiliated with a particular nation. The actions, dialogue, clothing and particular behaviours of all characters are useful in answering this question. Further, by contrasting the ways in which American characters are positioned vis-à-vis non-American characters, robust and useful data can be collected. Further, question two is primarily designed to elucidate particular aspects of the first question. By examining the variations between different non-American characters, the nature of their othering can be effectively demonstrated. This allows examination of whether all non-Americans are treated equally, or whether they are differentiated from each other. The second research question will also define the methods by which characters are defined American or non-American and what role this plays in constructing nation. Such categorisation is vital to answering the first question and allowing effective collection of data. Categorisation of data is an important analytical tool, and collecting data about American versus non-American characters works well within the paradigm established by the program itself.

In assessing the representation of nation in *The Simpsons*, it is important to be conscious not to ascribe too much importance to the role of those representations in defining audience views of nation. To do so would be to fall into the trap that Couldry calls “the myth of the mediated centre” (2003). This myth reminds media scholars that the media is not the sole arbiter of culture and worldview. Hall adds that within a positivist strand of media scholarship:

‘meaning’ tends to be conceptualised in a very reductive way - largely, in effect, as manifest content or message, on the basis of a very simple notion of ‘language’ as one-way communication (1999, p. 310).

The active audience paradigm is very much evident in the interpretation of data in this study, but is not a central concern. How the representations of nation in *The Simpsons* are received or understood by audiences is a matter for other research and analysis.² Whether it then influences audience members' own schema of their national identity or anyone else's is also for another study. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that there are occasions where audiences, broadcasters and governments in countries like Australia, Brazil and Japan have reacted negatively to episodes portraying their peoples and places (Dobson, 2006). *The Simpsons'* creator Matt Groening is also conscious that depictions of particular nations can spark strong reactions, even apologising to a journalist for the episode *Bart vs. Australia* (6.16, Idata, 2000).

The research questions are addressed through a rigorous literature review and a multi-disciplinary research method, set out in five chapters. This chapter establishes the scope of the project and outlines the two key research questions. In Chapter Two, a review of the work of Billig, Anderson, Said, Hall and other relevant theorists establishes and contextualises this study, firmly placing it at the intersection of political and media theory. That chapter accounts also for relevant research into *The Simpsons* in cross-national and supranational contexts. Chapter Three establishes the multi-disciplinary methodological framework by which *The Simpsons* has been analysed in this study, outlining a method consisting of a content analysis and a detailed discourse analysis. The study identifies and analyses the ways that discursive structures of nation are established and maintained in *The Simpsons*. This approach simultaneously delivers a detailed quantitative dataset drawn from manifest content within the show while also allowing a rigorous application of qualitative analytical techniques. The first ten seasons of the show have been selected for analysis. Chapter Four discusses the data actually

² Turner (2012) addresses this in some detail, especially in chapter eight 'The Ugly Springfieldianite'.

collected in the content analysis and discourse analysis, noting the relative importance of each of the elements of nation and the nuance associated with representation of different nations, including so-called stateless nations such as constituent countries of the United Kingdom. Chapter Five is the concluding chapter and highlights the importance of the methodological approach used for obtaining and interpreting data from the show.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1: OVERVIEW

The Simpsons has been the source of many academic studies, but only a few have focused on the depiction of distinct cultures and ideas of nation³ in the show. This is despite productions and representations of nation in virtually every episode. Among the pantheon of characters that regularly feature in *The Simpsons* are immigrants from India and Scotland, an Italian-style mob boss, and others of uncertain origin. The Simpson family regularly visits foreign countries and lampoons their history and culture. Those representations are distributed around the world, interpreted and reinterpreted by thousands of viewers in dozens of countries. This project attempts to identify the ontologies of nation in *The Simpsons* by marrying the work of relevant theorists with a detailed multi-disciplinary analysis of the foundational seasons of *The Simpsons*.

Benedict Anderson, Michael Billig, Edward Said, Stuart Hall have all addressed representations, though they each approached the subject somewhat differently. Anderson's focus was on collective communities through which nations themselves have been constructed and represented. His seminal work *Imagined Communities* outlines the method by which conventional nationhood was established, principally noting the importance of print-capitalism for projecting in the minds of members of national communities the shared "image of their communion" (1991, p. 6). Billig's *Banal Nationalism* argues that nationalism is not only confined to zones of hot nationalistic contest, but is rife in "the West's nation-states" because "[i]n a world of nation-states, nationalism cannot be confined to

³ Use of the term 'nation' in this thesis does not always denote the defined sovereign geopolitical unit known as the 'nation-state'. However, as Castello argues "states have been the main nation builders, restorers and remakers" (Castello, 2009, p. 305). This makes the distinction difficult to achieve. The othering process often works to exclude those identified with stateless nations and religio-national or racialised national collectives, so for the purpose of this thesis, the two terms cannot be comprehended as identical.

the periphery” (1995, p. 5). Said’s approach, in *Orientalism*, was to critically assess the role of Western European literature in formulating non-European places and people as ‘others’. Said studied the production of knowledge about the Oriental other, which he found to be characterised by simplification and difference: “orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident”” (1978, p. 2). Othering reduces the other simply to an object of study, rather than a human being. Hall similarly argues that “people who are in any way significantly different from the majority” are systematically represented “through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes” (1997, p. 229). He goes on to note “there is always a relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition” (1997, p. 235). The other is positioned as the subjugant in a constructed binary between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In concert with Said, Hall traces historical representations of the other in European and American media. He argues also that stereotypical representations “have persisted into the late twentieth century” (1997, p. 249). It follows that these representations are inherent in television - one of the more dominant and pervasive cultural media forms of the late twentieth century.

The self-referential or self-conscious nature of *The Simpsons* is acknowledged by Turner (2012), Gray (2007), Cantor (1999), Dobson (2006) and many others (such as those in the 2004 collection *Leaving Springfield*, edited by Alberti). This characteristic is a kind of cover and explanation for the approach to many of the issues in the show. Dobson (2006) highlights it as part of a broader postmodern milieu of self-reflection and self-referentiality. Chow argues that *The Simpsons* recycles “the trash, the most degraded aspects of televisual culture, into a new and improved commodity product” (2004, p. 109). This allows the show to consciously address and satirise a wide variety of social practices, including and especially its own production. Citing Patricia Mellencamp, Chow continues: “post-modern capital brazenly announces what was previously hidden”

(ibid). The practice of foregrounding “previously hidden” matters is very strong in *The Simpsons*, placing it firmly within this spectrum of post-modern television to which Dobson alludes. This discursive element of the show will form an important part of the later analysis in this paper.

The polemics of Anderson, Said, Hall and Billig rest upon the shared thread of mediated representation. For Billig and Anderson, that representation is of national communities. For Said and Hall it is of those constituted as being outside of any given community. This mediated other can be found in newspapers, books, television programs, and even stained glass reliefs. The following literature review accounts for these scholars and others relevant to an understanding of the representation of nation in and on the media. It locates television representations of the nation within this broader field and addresses a range of relevant theorists and theories, ranging from those who deal with construction of ‘nation’ (such as Anderson and Billig) to those that address television in detail. Finally, those scholars that deal specifically with issues of national representations in *The Simpsons* have also been addressed.

Taking a cue from the division between Billig and Anderson on the one hand and Hall and Said on the other, this chapter includes two further sections. The first addresses positivist representations of nation while the second addresses the construction of boundaries between nations.

2.2: IMAGINING THE NATION

The imagining of the nation can be traced to media representations, forged through common languages and understandings. Anderson’s argument that the nation “is an imagined political community... both inherently limited and sovereign” is dependent on an emerging media industry facilitating this imagining (1991, p. 6). “Print-capitalism”, he wrote, “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves and relate themselves to others in profoundly new ways”

(1991, p. 36). The imagined community of the nation exists because its members have internalised media representations of the nation. Anderson points also to the importance of visual representations in affirming the nation:

A fundamental change was taking place in modes of apprehending the world, which, more than anything, made it possible to 'think' the nation. To get a feeling for this change, we can profitably turn to the visual representations of the sacral communities, such as the reliefs and stained-glass windows of mediaeval churches, or the paintings of early Italian and Flemish masters (1991, p. 22)

Anderson's visual and textual representations draw upon symbols of nation. Characterisations of people and places as 'national' people and places became part of these representations to communicate particular understandings of nation. The visual representations forged by these sacral communities can be characterised as a forerunner to the television, which projects and re-projects mediated images that represent particular understandings (or imaginings) of nation. Anderson's reference to the "limited" nature of nations is also important, as beyond the borders of any given nation are other nations and other peoples. Occasionally, the outsiders are also physically inside the geographic national boundaries, and their presence too can be challenged.

Anderson's imagined communities are pervasive and robust. They are the basis of the organisation of human government and society and may be strong influences on individual notions of worth and purpose. Castello writes that "nationality, nationalism and the nation-state are not weakening but are in fact the powerful logic behind modern social and cultural organization" (2009, p. 304). Billig notes that "the world of nations is the everyday world, the familiar terrain of contemporary times" (1995, p. 6). The pervasive strength in the idea of nation is underlined by the willingness of humans to die for such "limited imaginings" (Anderson,

1991, p. 7). For Anderson, the seed of this willingness lies in the seemingly eternal nature of nations, which “always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future” (1991, p. 12; see also Anderson, 1999). The depiction on television of the nature, history and future of nations is therefore an important area of study. For Billig, nations are reproduced daily both in and outside of the media. Often, such reproductions take place through daily ‘flaggings’ which may be literal hangings of national flags or the routine use of a ‘deixis’ of words that point to the nation. Within *The Simpsons*, as demonstrated in this study, is a strong element of both forms of banal nationalism.

Anderson’s collective nationalism may be interpreted as recognition, however implicit, of the existence of clear national identities. But Malešević contends the very idea of national identity, arguing it “is a conceptual chimera not worthy of serious analytical pursuit” (2011, p. 272). Instead, he argues constructions and representations of nation and nationalism are more worthy of study. The social nature of human beings invokes “national identity as an anchor that provides emotional stability, historical durability and a strong sense of ontological security” (Malešević, 2011, p. 287). But its invocation does not create nor prove the concept. This polemic is not inconsistent with Anderson’s imagined communities. Anderson points to the phenomenon of nationalism rather than national identity as his key field of inquiry. The two are linked but not inseparable. As such, Malešević’s argument is valuable to defining and narrowing the focus in this project. To focus on national identity in *The Simpsons* would mean attempting to establish the beliefs of fictional characters, and then entertaining those beliefs. As Vessey puts it regarding the Simpsons’ God-bothering neighbour, “Ned Flanders is only that which Matt Groening and his staff make him to be... Ned has no beliefs and does not actually act” (2002, p. 203). On this basis would be difficult and frivolous to say that a given character considers him or herself ‘American’ or ‘Japanese’ or any

other nationality and even more problematic to project his or her behaviour in situations that are not explicitly shown on screen. Yet, Kaufman contends national identities are a driver of behaviour: “They can motivate revolution, power a state’s domestic and foreign policies, or help to consolidate a set of political institutions” (2008, p. 449). Rather than attempting to mediate or determine the validity of national identity or establish identity on behalf of a particular character, this study interprets characters as part of the ontologies of nations represented in the show. The association of particular characters with particular nations (and therefore how those nations are represented) is an important part of this study, but it is neither necessary nor fruitful to establish any character’s national identity, nor to contest the concept.

As Anderson notes, the nation’s imagining occurs through an imagining process by which mediated representations of nation are produced and reproduced. A complex, layered system of symbolic resources is employed in this process. Kaufman suggests these symbolic resources may be: “geographical, genealogical, cultural, historical [or] institutional” (2008, p. 251). He provides examples relevant to particular nations in each of these categories, but cannot decide how to define them in sufficiently workable terms. Castello has also identified a broad range of representations of nation in television, noting that “the process of national culture building” in television is largely reliant on four elements - territory; language; cultural representations; and historical and institutional referents (2009, p. 303). The level and type of representation of each of these is a politically loaded decision on the part of the television makers. Territory and language are simple to conceive, but tend to exclude diasporas who may have no link to the referent territory in question, or may speak a language different from that of their ‘homeland’ by dint of their current location. But language and territory are both strong and clear referents to particular nations within television productions. Territorial symbols feature strongly in sweeping landscape shots, outdoor scenes, maps and even

architecture. Castello espouses the importance of geographic resources (or territory) in presenting particular images of the nation: “*Dallas* presented the America of oil wells, *Falcon Crest* the South-West vineyard landscapes” (2009, p. 312). Meanwhile, a monolingual representation of a particular nation “banalizes a reality that does not exist” (2009, p. 309). The banal presence of English in *The Simpsons* is highlighted only when characters speak other languages, yet the role of English in normalising a particular discourse about America is important. So too is the occasional but regular appearance of Spanish in everyday Springfield. Castello’s two other symbols of nation - cultural representations and historical/institutional referents - are much more difficult to account for or define in such a way that they may be sought out in other texts. They are broad and ineffable categories demonstrable only with reference to particular nations. In illustration of cultural representations, Castello asks “what should be on display in ‘national’ museums?” (2009, p. 312). This question elicits a response that is dependent on the nation under examination. The historical and institutional peculiarities of nation too are difficult to define, especially since “the national context can modify these elements or give rise to others” (Castello, 2009, p. 216). Castello is bereft of useful definitions of those symbols as might be applicable beyond his examples. It is a problem that befalls many scholars of nation, and is related to Hobsbawm’s observation of the difficulty in defining nation itself, and his lamentation that if only “nation watching was as simple as bird watching” (1992, p. 5). Visvanathan is equally morose to the prospect of useful definitions of nation, noting the “congruency between people, history and territory was easy at the level of definition but problematic at the level of reality” (2006, p. 553). And so it is in the mediated ‘reality’ presented on *The Simpsons*. Nonetheless, some of Castello’s examples are particularly relevant to *The Simpsons*, such as those in his listing of cultural elements of nation such as “history, folklore, sport, gastronomy [and] tradition” (2009, p. 312). The example of gastronomy proves most relevant, given the role of food and eating within *The Simpsons*. Conversely, sport is

rarely presented in *The Simpsons* (and even more rarely in a “national” context) while the role of folklore is difficult to establish and is usually only present in unusual, non-canonical episodes such as the *Treehouse of Horror* Halloween specials. The celebration of national days is another tradition identified by Castello as an important part of nation building (2009, p. 313). Elgenius concurs, citing the role of national days being employed to “celebrate, recognise, promote, (re)create and (re)enforce identities” (2011, p. 397). For Elgenius, the flag is also a particularly powerful symbol of nation, given its role in uniting competing versions of national identity (2011).

Billig endorses the importance of names and other symbolic resources of nation in *Banal Nationalism* (1995). Names are an important part of a nation’s claim to existence:

The imagining of this particularity forms part of a universal code for nationalist consciousness: no one should usurp another’s name, nor their right to name themselves... the magic of ‘our’ name matters to ‘us’ deeply, which national ‘we’ are: it indicates who ‘we’ are, and, more basically *that* ‘we’ are. (1995, p. 73 emphasis in original)

The essentialist, reductive and mythologising practices of naming nations can point simultaneously to the history, ideology and people of a nation. The name also acts as a barrier to nation, restricting others from applying the same name to their own nation. Billig is also clear on the importance of place (expressed above as ‘territory’) in the national imagining:

Outlying districts are as integral as the metropolitan areas: the images of the remote countryside are as commonly used as stereotypically national images as are the grand public buildings of the capital city (Billig, 1995, p. 75).

The presentation of territory, including prominent buildings, can be a strong referent of nation. The practice by which particular places come to represent a nation is accounted for in this study. Smith (1993) contests the reading of nation as (or through) literary text by Anderson and others, but confers importance also upon the role of architecture and other visual arts for contributing to a comprehensive image of the nation. There is undoubtedly a strong role for visual imagery in representing national territory, both built and geographic.

The role of stamps and currency in contributing to notions of nation has also been identified by scholars such as Wallach (2011) and Penrose and Cumming (2011). However, television and communications theorists do not regularly cite either as symbolic resources of nation within mediated realms. Their role in the construction of nation is not central to many of television's imagined communities, and is rare in *The Simpsons*. As such, while the importance of these two symbols of nation can be accepted, it is not fruitful to consider them further in this project.

Drawing on Castello and Kaufman's lists as a departure point, with support from Elgenius and Billig, and acknowledging the suggestions of Wallach and Penrose and Cumming, the applicability of symbolic resources of nation such as national days, flags, gastronomy, territory, language and name to this project is clear. As such it is these elements that will underwrite the collection of data from *The Simpsons* for content analysis. Other elements as identified from the show will be addressed in the discourse analysis.

Sometimes, *The Simpsons* is appropriated for a local context, as Ferrari (2009) notes in discussing the dubbing of characters to meet regional Italian stereotypes before broadcast in Italy. Otherwise, and particularly in English-speaking nations, the representations arrive on non-American television screens without alteration. That is not to say the images are not contended, nor influenced by the very act of reception. Dobson (2009)

notes the representations of given countries are often rejected or strongly contended by broadcasters and audiences alike. Of note, this occurred in episodes in which the Simpson family visited Australia, Brazil, and Japan (Dobson, 2006; Turner, 2012). Nonetheless, the representations encoded within *The Simpsons*, both in the mundane everyday activities in Springfield and when the Simpson family ventures beyond American borders contain multiple layered meanings that point to the role of nation in America and the American media. The importance of non-American nations acting as foils or a counterpoint to American identity is clear. Castello also offers a range of European examples where television has been used to promote and represent particular ideas of nation (2009). For Castello in particular, television can become a vehicle for presenting stateless national identities, such as those found in Scotland, Wales, Catalonia and parts of Belgium (2009). This work is highly relevant to representations of the United Kingdom's constituent countries in *The Simpsons*.

While there are a variety of referents that can be accepted as symbolic resources of nation, only a few are practically applicable in this study. The role of each of these is addressed in more detail in the methodology chapter.

2.3: IMAGINING OUTSIDERS

If an imagined community constitutes the inside of a given nation, then other imagined communities must exist outside that nation. Anderson addresses the limited nature of his imagined communities: "even the largest of them... has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (1991, p. 7). Said (1978) contends communities outside of militarily and economically dominant nations have been represented as inherently inferior 'others'. In particular, he makes sense of the 'Orient' as one of Europe's "deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (1978, p. 1). In Western literature, Said found an essentialist, caricatured image

of the Oriental Other. The images “represent or stand in for a very large entity, otherwise impossibly diffuse which they enable one to grasp or see. They are also *characters*, related to such types as the braggarts, misers or gluttons” (Said, 1978, p. 66 emphasis in original). The othering process is dependent on representing the outsiders as different, even perverse or deviant and on representing outsiders as inferior to the dominant culture. This goes to the core of the discussion about reflexive imagining of nations: as nations imagine others, they imagine themselves, and as they imagine themselves, they imagine others. Billig is succinct on this point, noting “there can be no ‘us’ without a ‘them’” (1995, p. 78). However, others are not always physically outside the borders of a nation. Instead, there may be discursive symbolic divisions that separate them from the majority, even when they are manifestly identified as being of the same nation. The role of both overt and covert symbols of nation is examined in the discussion chapter.

Billig is keen to establish the role of borders as both symbolic and literal delineations of nation:

The special quality, which marks the homeland as ‘ours’, continues without dilation right up to the borders: and there it stops, to be separated from the different foreign essence which is marking out the territory on the other side (1995, p. 75)

National borders can be invoked or symbolised by human-made objects such as maps and geographic features such as rivers, deserts and mountains. The role of language is also relevant: words such as ‘international’ implicitly signal other nations beyond ‘this’ nation. Visvanathan dramatically posits that exclusion is a central and determining factor in the very idea of nation and citizenship: “the modern idea of the citizen has a perpetual problem with the other, an hostility to all those ways of life that do not qualify for its passport” (2006, p. 535). The politics of exclusion are evident in banal expressions of nation such as Billig’s

flaggings or the evocation of borders. Such representations are both positive affirmations of the nation they present and reflexive oppositional positioning against the idea of other nations. Said says the 'system' of orientalism "operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting" (1978, p. 273). This observation about the role and means of representation is a highly judicious point that underscores the arguments in this paper: national imaginings are exclusionary practices. This is as evident in *The Simpsons* as it is elsewhere.

Classification is important for constructing boundaries and implementing exclusionary practices. Symbolic boundaries "keep the categories 'pure', giving cultures their unique meaning and identity... The retreat of many cultures towards 'closure' against foreigners, intruders, aliens and 'others' is part of the same process of purification" (1997, p. 236). The process of othering both in and on the media becomes clear when we begin to consider how such boundaries are established. Representations of non-American nations in *The Simpsons* can be accounted for by Said's and Hall's understandings of the role of language, discourse and image in constructing subjugant others. The very use of national(ised) names – or classifications – invokes exclusion and demarcation.

The media representation of otherness is a contested field, with a number of prominent scholars. Hall argues that "racial stereotypes - what we may call a 'racialized regime of representation' - have persisted into the late twentieth century" (1997, p. 249). Such 'racialized regimes' are probably inherent within *The Simpsons*, given its long-running and prominent position in the American (indeed, global) media landscape. Importantly, however, Hall also noted that such representations are not received by audiences without message interference: "Meaning... is established through dialogue - it is fundamentally *dialogic*. Everything we say and mean is modified by the interaction and interplay with another person"

(1997, pp. 235–36). Particular representations are embedded with meaning from their creators and contributors at least as much as they are by actively interpreted by the audience. Messages are framed in such a way that certain meanings seem to be the preferred or intended interpretation. Like Castello, “we accept the active audience paradigm, but... who could think that the production discourse orientation has nothing to do with the meaning captured by the audience?” (2009, p. 307). Input into meaning in fictional animated television can come from the writers, directors, producers, animators and voice actors. It is therefore difficult to establish a precise locus of meaning in a given representation. Nonetheless, particular characters and symbols are represented and used in particular ways. The question is how those representations construct and signal particular ideas of nation in *The Simpsons*.

Within nations, there are also outsiders, or ‘others’. But for Billig, unless those others are advocating or agitating for separate independent national territory, they are still working within the confines of nationhood (1995). Speaking specifically of “hyphenated” multicultural identities, Billig argues:

When the multicultural ideal is tied to the notion of a nation, then ‘identity politics’ is situated within the nation’s tradition of argument: identities within the nation are contested, but not the identity of the nation itself (1995, p. 148)

The national element here is pervasive and banal. It is the suffix to any other claimed identity, often literally (as in ‘African-American’). Billig’s logic on this is strong, but fails to acknowledge the ostracisation of those that may not be ‘officially’ acknowledged as belonging to the nation in question. This exclusion is evidenced in the vote to eject non-American citizens from Springfield in *Much Apu About Nothing* (7.23). In this episode, Springfield’s police officers act (unusually) as an efficient and effective agency enforcing state hegemony to round up migrants following the vote,

even though those same characters are explicitly presented as more wholly 'American' than even Homer Simpson.

The issues raised in constructing borders around nations, both physically and symbolically, present a very clear dynamic of exclusionary practices. This is raised in the relevant literature and powerfully represented in *The Simpsons*. While efforts at positively constructing nation are also present visually, aurally and textually, the nation (any nation) is most commonly presented in opposition to other nations. Just as Springfield is everything that Shelbyville is not (and vice versa), America is everything that everyone else is not, at least in the communal imagining (Anderson 1991). Taking cues from the theorists discussed above, this paper traces both the positive and reflexive imaginings of nation in *The Simpsons*, finding the politics of exclusion evident in even the most banal representations.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1: OVERVIEW

When he called for a comprehensive investigation into the appearance and form of flaggings of the United States of America in “American-made, globally distributed television programmes”, Billig provided a useful cue for this study (1995, p. 150). The suggestion to evaluate the nature and number of waved and unwaved flags, flaggings of scene, the presence of authorities of state and more demanded a careful methodology. This challenge has been met by the three key complementary research methods employed in this study to collect and analyse data. These have consisted of analysis of significant literature related to the study of representations of nation and some literature related specifically to *The Simpsons*, a detailed content analysis of the first ten seasons of *The Simpsons*, and a further discourse analysis of those ten seasons. The content analysis yielded a significant amount of quantitative data, which was then triangulated against findings from the discourse analysis. As Hansen et al. note: “content analysis is and should be enriched by the theoretical framework offered by other more qualitative approaches, while bringing to these a methodological rigour, prescriptions for use, and systematicity” (1998, p. 91). As such, content analysis was selected to provide a significant amount of data, which could be tested and triangulated against the theoretical paradigms of a discourse analysis. The study of relevant literature appears above, and is used to enlighten and contextualise discussion of data collected in the content analysis and discourse analysis. The use of each of these three methods allows a robust analysis of the representation of nation in *The Simpsons*. The following sections provide detail on the method of content analysis and discourse analysis employed in this study. The application of the content analysis method was largely reliant on the descriptions provided by Weerakkody (2009), Hansen et al. (1998) and Berger (1998). The

discourse analysis framework was drawn from Weerakkody (2009), Van Dijk (2006) and Putnam (2010).

226 episodes of *The Simpsons*, comprising seasons one through ten have been selected for inclusion in this content analysis. These episodes are located on the digital versatile disc (DVD) copies of these seasons released in Australia by Twentieth Century Fox. Additional non-episodic information (including special features and commentary) contained on these discs was not part of the content analysis, but was relied upon to establish context and provide data relevant to the broader study and in the discourse analysis. The decision to focus only on the first ten seasons was made for several reasons, including availability of each season on standard DVD and manageability. The sample size would simply have been too large if any more than ten seasons had been studied. Further, this marker is important because it is claimed that the show degenerated at or around season nine. Matt Groening says on the introduction to *The Complete Ninth Season* that *The Principal and the Pauper* (9.2) is his least favourite episode. It is an episode that cast-member Harry Shearer has also decried for throwing away Seymour Skinner's back story (Wilonsky, 2001). Television and film critic Ian Jones extends the critique, pinpointing that same episode as the moment that "a looser, lazier sensibility took hold" of the show (2007). In *Planet Simpson*, Turner concurs that the show's "golden age" ended in mid-1997, or the end of the eighth season (2012, p. 7). The first ten seasons are both foundational and archetypal. They contain some of the more poignant episodes and the sharpest satire, demonstrating the best of *The Simpsons* in the eyes of both critics and staff. Additionally, by including a few episodes in which the series is considered to have been in decline, a rounded picture of the representations of nation can be obtained. At the same time, there is enough information in the first ten seasons to account for a thorough, rigorous analysis of the ontologies of nation in the show. *The Simpsons* is not a static text that was created and is now to be interpreted. Instead, it is

still growing and evolving as the seasons continue to be produced. The tenth season, therefore, is a sufficient marker at which to pause analysis of this cultural phenomenon. Later seasons would be a rich area for further analysis.

The content analysis consisted of the study author watching the 226 episodes identified above over a three-month period and identifying data using a coding method designed to elicit information about trends and specific incidences in representing nation throughout the seasons. The later discourse analysis was conducted based on relevant episodes identified from within the sample group as well as longer term trends and observations. This chapter contains an overview of the content analysis conducted and an introduction to the discourse analysis. In the following chapter, the data extracted in these processes is discussed in detail.

3.2: CONTENT ANALYSIS

A thorough and effective content analysis relies on a well-defined set of guidelines by which data is gathered. It is “based on measuring the amount of something... in a representative sampling of some mass-mediated popular art form” (Berger, 1998, p. 23). Content analysis allows media content to be quantified in a “systematic and reliable fashion” (Berger, 1998, p. 123). Further, it “lends itself to the analysis of large bodies of text or media content” (Hansen et al., 1998, p. 100). For a thorough examination, a large number of episodes should be studied. In specific terms, the “amount of something” referred to ought to be manifest within the content, rather than subtle, as manifest content is more easily and reliably coded. A comprehensive content analysis can help establish how nation is represented in *The Simpsons* by providing data on the number and types of appearances of particular manifestations of symbols of nation.

Content analysis can have some drawbacks, including a lack of reliability. Hansen et al. note this can be especially evident in “evaluative” categories such as positive/neutral/negative, favourable/unfavourable, etc (1998, p. 115). However, this can be overcome with a focus on strong coder training and by testing reliability. Issues around coder training and reliability are limited in this study since the coder is the study designer and author. Other criticisms of content analysis identified by Hansen include its “fragmentation of textual wholes [and] for its positivist notion of objectivity” (1998, p. 91). In this study, the content analysis is supplemented with a rigorous discourse analysis that treats each of the selected texts in depth. The content analysis is supposed to be complementary to the discourse analysis by providing indicative data about the relative frequency of national symbols in the sample texts. The content analysis approach is positivist, but is tempered and strengthened by the discourse analysis. However, because content analysis deals in apparently positive-objective data, there is also little room for subtlety. It is limited to manifest content. The drive to examine large quantity of data can further restrict its applicability to very complex situations. These issues provide further demand for supplementary analysis.

Hansen et al. (1998) set forth six steps for an effective content analysis: (1) defining the research questions; (2) selecting media and samples; (3) defining analytical categories; (4) constructing a coding schedule; (5) piloting the coding schedule; (6) data preparation and analysis. These steps are reflected in Weerakkody’s (2009) typology, and have been employed in this study.

The Simpsons is a rich audio-visual text that represents nation through a complex system of symbols, many of which are constitutive of the symbolic resources of nations themselves. The difficulty in definitively establishing useful tools for categorising and coding these symbolic resources has already been discussed. It is in establishing categories of

this type that the lack of subtlety evident in content analysis most obviously demonstrates the need of additional analytical tools. Within any prescriptive framework for analysing and codifying symbols across a variety of nations, there is bound to be difficulty in identifying useful symbols that are applicable to multiple nations. Drawing on Castello's (2009) and Kaufman's (2008) suggestions as a departure point, with support from Elgenius (2011) and Billig (1995), and acknowledging the suggestions of Wallach (2011) and Penrose and Cumming (2011), a series of broad but closed categories of content have been identified. It is these elements that underwrite the collection of data from *The Simpsons* for the content analysis. Other elements as identified from the show are addressed in the discourse analysis. The content categories are:

- Territory
- Language
- Flag
- Name
- Gastronomy
- National days
- Name

These categories were based upon the earlier discussion, and were chosen cognisant of the need for manifest content. Further, some categories have specific relevance to the types of behaviours within *The Simpsons*. For example, characters in the show regularly visit specific restaurants that are manifestly identified with a specific nation (such as the Italian restaurant Luigi's or the Japanese restaurant The Happy Sumo). The appearance of these gastronomic representations of nation have therefore been included while other items suggested by Castello were not

considered as important in the context of the show. A final category of 'other' was also included to account for those representations of nation that do not fit within the broad coding framework.

The normative or dominant language in *The Simpsons* is English. It is used in what Castello and Billig would term a "banal" fashion (Billig, 1995; Castello, 2009). English is present in nearly every scene either in written or spoken form, and often both. The coding of English as representative of America would heavily weight all results strongly in favour of America. As such, the use of English has not been coded as being of America, but it is assumed to be so unless otherwise noted. Conversely, the use of non-English languages within the show is a manifest indication of other nations, and has been coded as such. Similarly, it is difficult to code the landscape of Springfield as American landscape due to it being present in all outdoor shots. However, specific landscapes such as identified national parks, panning shots of national maps and named states have been codified as representative of the American nation. So too have appearances of, for example, the Eiffel Tower been coded as manifestations of France. The appearance of identifiable buildings such as the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, the United States Congress and the Taj Mahal all confirm the importance of territorial referents of nation as outlined by Billig (1995) and Castello (2009).

Finally, the use of a nation's name, any variance thereof, or reference to a particular non-fictional town or city within a specific nation has also been coded. The use of names in both written and spoken format is the clearest and most manifest reference to nations within *The Simpsons* and has been treated as such. However, the name has not been coded where it would more properly fit into another category. For example, a verbal or written reference to "Italian food" has been counted as gastronomy, rather than under the nation's name. Similarly, the appearance of national flags is a strong and deliberate reference to nation that ought to be accounted

for. The role of characters as representatives of nation has been examined within the discourse analysis unless those characters are associated with another symbol of nation. For example, Indian shopkeeper Apu's wife Manjula nearly always appears in a sari, while Groundskeeper Willie is occasionally dressed in a kilt. Such appearances have been counted as representative of the respective nations of India and Scotland in the 'other' category.

A series of nation-state specific a priori coding keys were applied to each of the identified symbolic resources and symbols in each episode, in addition to the collection of comments to identify what item specifically was coded. These coding keys relate to particular nations that were anticipated to be prevalent in *The Simpsons* due to regular characters having associations with those nations or the prevalence of episodes set in those countries. The frequency of appearances of symbols of each country was also counted. The nations chosen are as follows:

- United States of America
- India
- Scotland⁴
- Mexico
- Germany
- Japan
- Italy
- France
- Other

⁴ The distinction between Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom is addressed in detail in the discussion chapter.

In order to establish the relative importance of each reference to a particular nation in any of the categories, the information was collected in a scene-based system. That is, each item was counted individually, but only once where it appeared multiple times in the same scene. For example, where the word 'America' was said more than once by the same character in any given scene, it was only counted once in that scene. This approach provides consistency between audio and visual material. Otherwise, each utterance of a word would have been counted more than once while a single appearance of a written word in a long scene would only have counted once. A scene for this purpose was defined as a temporally and spatially congruous event involving the same characters. Where the setting or time changes, a scene change is assumed to have taken place and each new occurrence of each referent was coded.

Additionally, the following identifying information was collected for each of the examined episodes:

- Episode title
- Episode number (of season)
- Season

This information is important for locating the episodes within the broader context of the sample group and ensuring data is appropriately discussed in relation to the episode from which it came.

3.3: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

As an enriching complement to the quantitative content analysis, a qualitative discourse analysis was also applied to selected aspects of the sample group of *Simpsons* episodes. The self-referential nature of *The Simpsons* is widely acknowledged (Alberti, 2004; Cantor, 1999; Dobson, 2006; Gray, 2007; Turner, 2012) and must inform any analysis of other discourses in the show. Thus, the discourse analysis thematically

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addresses the representation of non-American nations, the appearance of character-as-nation, the overarching politics of exclusion and the discursive practices associated with representing America. All the while, the discussion acknowledges the importance of the self-consciousness evident in the majority of episodes. The particular form of discourse analysis used in this study has taken account of structuralist perspectives to additionally give a stronger overview of each episode, theme or character, rather than simply examining discrete details such as single lines or images. Additionally, each episode is contextualised within the wider socio-historical discourse of its creation date and within *The Simpsons* itself. This has been achieved by anchoring the arguments within the broader context of data drawn from the content analysis. The representations of nation in *The Simpsons* were put into different categories, including territory/place, flags, names, gastronomy, historical figures and events and national institutions. Each of these is connected by discursive structures that run through many seasons and episodes. Those structures are the object of this discourse analysis.

Barthes explores the use of a structuralist perspective in analysing a text, arguing:

either a narrative is merely a rambling collection of events, in which case nothing can be said about it other than by referring back to the storyteller's (the author's) art, talent or genius... or else it shares with other narratives a common structure which is open to analysis (1977, p. 80)

The efficacy of discourse analysis in identifying and examining the structures underlying the construction of nation in *The Simpsons* is clear in this light. It allows a thorough study of the effective ontology of nation, encouraging and guiding the analysis to unearth what is embedded and hidden, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in the text.

Van Dijk suggests that discourse analysis examines how “ideologies are acquired, expressed, enacted and reproduced by discourse” (2006, p. 124). Put simply, a discourse analysis takes account of how particular subjects are talked or thought about, and what that might mean in relation to any intended messages. Weerakkody adds that it “explores how the central themes of a text are linked to the ideologies and motivations of the creator of the message” (2009, p. 250). She is pointing to intended reception of the text. While intended reception is not the core focus of this project, it has been taken account of by including interviews and DVD commentaries as source data. The framing of particular issues in particular ways can direct the viewer toward certain implied meanings. For the purposes of this study, the issues addressed in considering this framing relate primarily to the ontologies of nation contained in *The Simpsons*. Such implied meanings and frames can be expressed through discursive actions, which may be “intonation, stress or volume in the expression of a word or phrase” or by the actual words used (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 124). Indeed, the range of ideologically charged symbolic terms and objects that may be employed in constructing or maintaining ideas of nation is vast. The focus in this study is on the ideological frame of the text, which means exploring how identified issues have been weighted or communicated. Discourse analysis can contribute to understanding the use of these terms and images by thoroughly addressing their historical, social, and in-text contexts. In this case, information is drawn from within the sample group of episodes and articulated against a variety of academic sources and associated material such as DVD commentaries and interviews.

For Van Dijk, one issue arising from discourse analysis is the lack of understanding of ‘intentionality’. That is, it is difficult to establish the intention of text creators based only on discrete textual components, because “words, phrases, topics or intonations, are not ideologically biased. It is their specific use in specific communicative situations that make them so” (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 128). In this study, ‘intentionality’ has

been addressed by supplementing in-text information with meta-information such as DVD commentaries and published interviews addressing either issues or episodes in question. This allows greater understanding of what meaning contributors intended in particular images and words, and adds greater depth to the discourse analysis of each episode. However, as noted above, intentionality is not so much the core of this study as much as the importance of in-text framing of issues.

Another problem in conducting a detailed discourse analysis is the issue of ideological prejudices - where pre-existing expectations of the recipient (in this case, the author of this study) colour the actual discourse embedded in the text. This cannot be eliminated altogether, but is somewhat diminished in this study by the themes, characters and episodes selected for discourse analysis having been determined by the results of the content analysis. Each theme, character or episode has been chosen because of the volume of data attributable to it from the content analysis. As such, they have been quantitatively determined to be more preoccupied with representations of nation before being selected for their particular focus and content. The decision in relation to each episode, subject and character is explained in detail in the discussion chapter.

In relation to *The Simpsons*, the motivations of the creator(s) can be studied from a number of perspectives. The DVD commentaries associated with given episodes are particularly relevant in deducing some meaning as perceived by the writers and directors of each episode. Further, many of the more noteworthy episodes (and those identified from the content analysis as ideal candidates for discourse analysis) have been discussed by the creators in interviews and other media. These two additional forms of data can be used to triangulate data gathered in the content analysis and information collected from close analysis of selected episodes. The impetus for the particular focus of this discourse analysis,

however, comes from the results of the content analysis, driven by the theoretical focus established in the literature review.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

4. 1: INTRODUCTION

The imagining of nations in *The Simpsons* is robust and reflexive. It is robust because it encompasses a variety of ways of presenting nation and presents strong ideas about both nations and those who identify with nations. It is reflexive because each nation is presented in relation to other nations and the people of those nations. Nations are never presented in isolation in *The Simpsons* because, as Billig says, “The national community can only be imagined by also imagining communities of foreigners” (1995, pp. 18–9). A number of specific nations are represented in the show with information ranging from their cultural products to their history, their territory to their people, and their flags to their food. The United States is, unsurprisingly, the overwhelmingly dominant nation-state presented in the show, and it is prominently flagged in banal forms.

This section presents the significant amount of data gathered in the content analysis, followed by a detailed discourse analysis. While the discourse analysis and the content analysis cannot be set apart from each other in terms of their contribution to this work, it is necessary to arrange them in this order for clarity. The information is presented thematically, revealing the role of banal daily flaggings of nation in remembering the nation (Billig, 1995). The importance of the identified categories of territory, language, flags and names in representing nation are strongly reinforced in the content analysis data. However, the role of gastronomy and national days is shown to be less important. Two other emergent categories were strongly evident in the data - historical events and figures and national institutions such as government entities. Across all of these data types, strong images of a number of nations emerged. Importantly, the politics of exclusion evident in the nation-presenting practices of *The Simpsons* are stark. The reactionist rejections of outsiders represented in the show are

self-conscious and overtly patriotic. The world of nations is also shown to be natural, reinforcing the borders - both physical and figurative - between nations and seeking to exclude outsiders. The data collected for this study shows dominant representations of the United States, what I have termed assertive Americanism, to be particularly strong from early 1994 to late 1996. Particularly of note are the strong presentations of American national institutions and historical figures in this period, though the overall discursive presence of the US is very strong. Further, clear delineations are drawn between the US and other nations, with some episodes focusing particularly on the contrast between America and other nations.

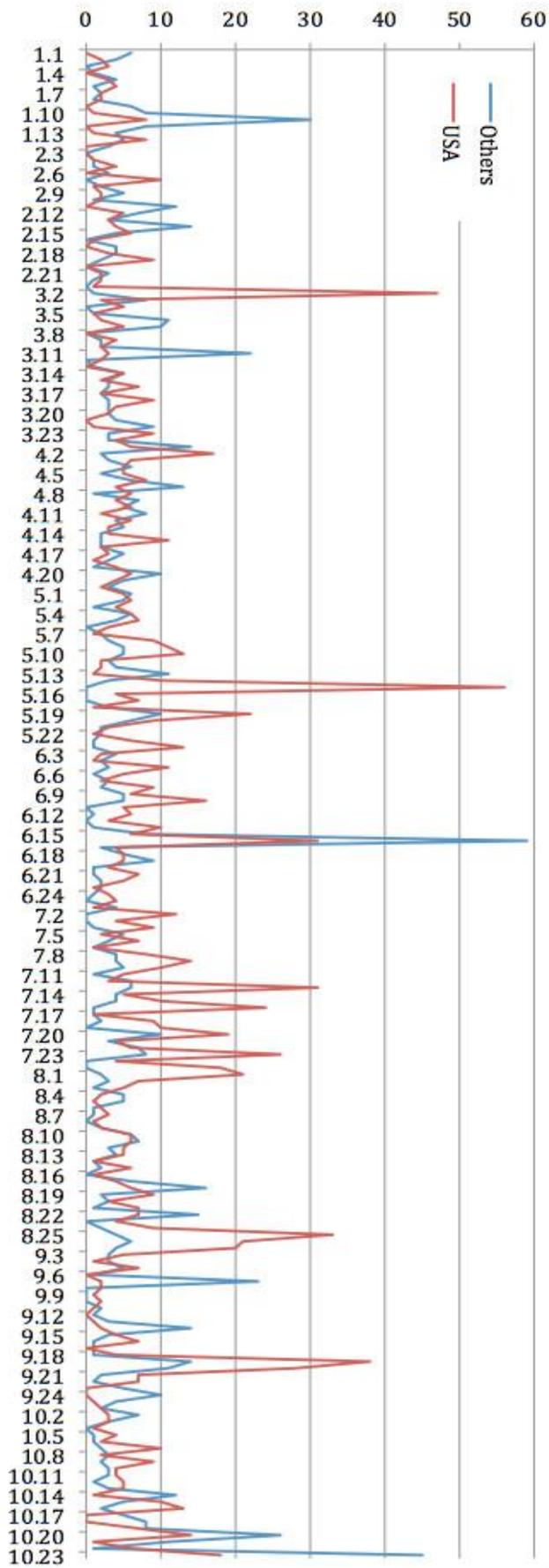
4.2: CONTENT ANALYSIS

The content analysis conducted in this study revealed a number of important trends. Over the course of the ten seasons examined, there are some isolated episodes that stand out for their presentation of nation, while the majority of episodes are fairly consistent. The major observable trend is a period of assertive Americanism from season five through season eight. This is further addressed below. The data also demonstrates considerable reliance on overt symbols of nation like names and flags throughout the seasons.

Figure 1 presents two series of conflated data, the first (in blue) showing all occurrences of references to nations other than the United States while the second showing references to the United States. The horizontal axis is a simple count of the number of references to nation observed in the content analysis while the vertical axis gives an approximation of episode numbers presented with the season number before the decimal point and the episode number afterwards. Each of the 226 examined episodes is represented on the graph, but only every third episode is numbered on the vertical axis due to space constraints.

The table demonstrates a clear trend to assertive Americanism from late in the fifth season through to the start of the eighth season. The episode *Deep Space Homer* (5.15) begins this period with Homer's journey to become an American astronaut with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The trend continues through to *You Only Move Twice* (8.2), in which Homer's new boss, supervillian Hank Scorpio, attempts to take over part of the American mainland. Representations of the US outstrip appearances of all other nations in the majority of these episodes, with the stark contrast of *Bart Vs Australia* (6.16) and a small handful of other episodes. However, even in *Bart Vs Australia*, representations of the US are higher than they are in many other episodes. Another notable episode in this period is *Two Bad Neighbors* (7.13) in which George H.W. Bush and his wife Barbara move in opposite the Simpson family. Homer's ensuing feud with the Bushes ends up embarrassing the former President in front of former Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Indeed, *Two Bad Neighbors* is marked by a strong spike in references to the United States partly thanks to the presence of Bush. Five other episodes in the second half of the seventh season also have high levels of references to the US. One of these, *Much Apu About Nothing* (7.23) invokes the exclusionary practices that will be discussed later in this paper.

Figure 1: Compiled Comparative Data - USA and All Other Nations



Deep Space Homer rates very highly on Figure 1 due mainly to its focus on NASA, which was coded as appearances of the American nation in the 'Other' category due to NASA's role as a 'national' organisation. In this episode, Homer competes for and wins the right to join a space shuttle crew to help combat NASA's flagging popularity, as epitomised by falling television ratings. Almost all NASA astronauts and other employees shown in the episode bear a US flag on their clothing, as do NASA buildings and vehicles. In fact, half of all references to nation in this episode are appearances of the US flag. The plot of the episode references NASA's Teacher In Space program, which aimed to send ordinary citizens into space until the death of the first participant in the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster of 1986. The strong focus on NASA's achievements and its place as an institution representing the American nation is a powerful example of the assertive American trend that began in this episode and continued until *You Only Move Twice*. There is a strong contrast between the national achievement-oriented *Deep Space Homer* and the fantastical *You Only Move Twice*, which features actual (and successful) challenges to United States sovereignty by a private army. Significantly, Homer's time as an American astronaut is again referenced in *Homer's Enemy* (8.23) while Hank Scorpio and his company is promptly forgotten.

In addition to featuring George Bush, *Two Bad Neighbors* includes a variety of overt references to the American nation. Amongst these are references to then-US President Bill Clinton, Bush's Vice President Dan Quayle, former US President Grover Cleveland (who "spanked" Grampa Abe Simpson on "two separate occasions"), playing cards from Air Force 1 and Bart explaining that Bush spanked him for "the good of the nation." While the American nation is strongly asserted in these examples, other nations are never far from the discourse. During the first part of the episode, Homer sells a tee-shirt bearing the face of Iranian revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini by telling the crowd that the "Ayatollah thinks

he's better than America" and urging them to "sock it to him in style" by purchasing the shirt. Later, Barbara Bush tells Marge that the feud between their husbands is "just like the Noriega thing" in reference to the US invasion of Panama under Bush's leadership in an effort to capture then Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega. Near the end of the episode, Barbara Bush demands her husband apologise to Homer for the feud as Mikhail Gorbachev looks on. George Bush responds: "But, Bar, we can't show any weakness in front of the Russians". The inclusion of Gorbachev, Khomeini and Noriega in the episode indicates a possible reason for the overt focus on symbols of America in this group of episodes. The spurt of assertive Americanism in these episodes could be evidence of an attempt to counter apparent challenges to American hegemony from Islam, communism and military governments, each of which are symbolised in this episode. While this particular episode first aired in 1996, some time after Khomeini's death, the Panamanian invasion and the fall of the Soviet Union, it is part of the broader trend that began early in 1994. The rise in American assertiveness here may also be attributable to efforts to fill a seeming power void following the reduction in prominence of these issues. *The Simpsons* seems to be playing into a global reassertion of American values and attitudes throughout the mid-1990s. The two strongest elements of the American nation in this period are national institutions like NASA and nationalised historical figures like George Bush and Bill Clinton.

The positive-assertive representation of the American nation is not limited only to episodes within the 1996-1994 period referred to above. Other notable episodes in this vein, represented by distinct spikes on Figure 1, include *Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington* (3.2), *The Secret War of Lisa Simpson* (8.25) and *The Principal and the Pauper* (9.2). In all of these episodes, the role of national institutions is prominent. In *Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington*, Lisa, more earnest and learned in her understanding of American nation than either her father or brother, enters an essay competition about America's greatness. While searching for inspiration in

Springfield forest, a bald eagle lands nearby and strikes a pose starkly reminiscent of the Great Seal of the United States. Later, Lisa visits a variety of national landmarks as she re-drafts the essay ahead of the national competition finale. But Lisa's faith in America is destroyed when she overhears her congressman being bribed to open Springfield forest to logging interests. It appears that, despite the flood of positive-assertive references to America until this point, *The Simpsons* is set to demolish the façade of the just nation-state. Of course, the episode is laced with sharp irony, such the school children being asked to espouse a pro-government, pro-nation position. Anderson argues that Lisa's blind patriotism until now is due to her role as an innocent child, a key symbol for establishing the eternal natural goodness of nations (1999). Lisa delivers a new essay entitled 'Cesspool on the Potomac', which sparks off a federal investigation that leads to the congressman's arrest, and she later gushes "the system works". The instruments of the nation-state swung into action to prevent a little girl from "losing faith in democracy", reinforcing the very notion the episode was trying to undercut and leaving the overt impression that the American state is indeed sound. *The Secret War of Lisa Simpson* is more straightforward. Lisa and Bart enroll in a military school, where Lisa faces discrimination because she is the only female student. The students face a number of tests designed to inculcate them with the military mindset before being told by their commandant, at graduation, that they are not likely to fight in any real wars:

The wars of the future will not be fought on the battlefield or at sea. They will be fought in space, or possibly on top of a very tall mountain. In either case, most of the actual fighting will be done by small robots. And as you go forth today remember always your duty is clear: to build and maintain those robots.

The nation is banally present all over the school, with flags flying from the main buildings and adorning soldier's uniforms. The letters 'US' are also

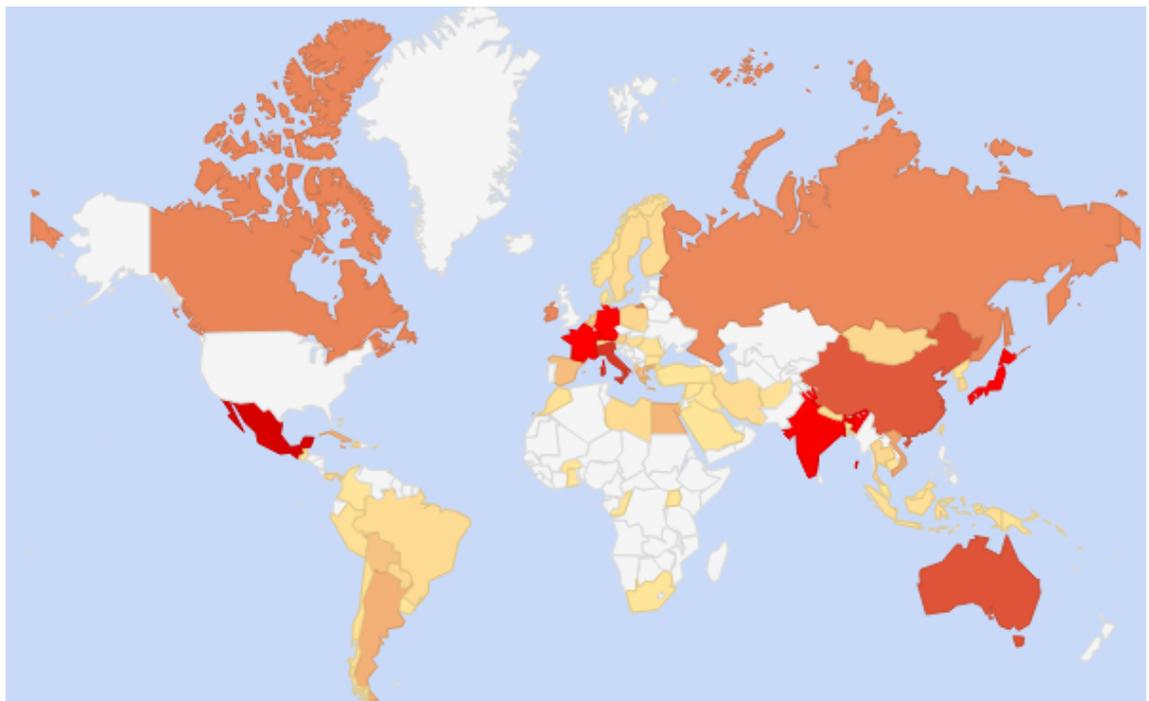
stamped on the students' shirts. *The Principal and the Pauper* briefly revisits representations of the military when Principal Skinner is unmasked as a fraud - his real name is Armin Tamzarian - and returns to his old life as a "no-goodnik" in Capital City. Both Tamzarian and the real Seymour Skinner have flashbacks to their military service in the Vietnam War, accounting for a good number of the representations of nation. In all three of these episodes, as in the raft of episodes discussed above, a trend toward assertive Americanism is clear.

Two other episodes in the sample also have particularly high number of representations of the United States, but each are more negative than those discussed above. *The City of New York vs. Homer Simpson* (9.1) appears in this group overwhelmingly because of its territorial/place representations of New York. The city is a threatening place for the small-town Homer and is the scene of a series of misadventures for him. *Simpson Tide* (9.19) again addresses the role of the military in everyday American life. This time, Homer and his friends join the Naval Reserve, which, as a television advertisement tells them, is "America's 17th line of defense, between the Mississippi National Guard and the League of Women Voters". The naval officers featured in the episode are either incompetent (because they leave Homer in charge of a nuclear submarine) or corrupt (which is why Homer is excused from his court-martial). This episode also includes a strong oppositional appearance of Russia/Soviet Union when the American United Nations representative negotiates with the Russian representative to allow Homer to return his submarine to America. The Russian representative refers to his country as the "Soviet Union", which prompts surprise from the other characters who thought the Soviet Union had broken up. The Russian replies: "That's what we wanted you to think." Shortly afterwards, symbols of the Soviet Union are shown replacing those of Russia, and Soviet tanks roll out on the streets of Moscow. This oppositional element is strong in presentations of a number of nations in the show, but each of these nations is featured less

heavily than many other nations. When these presentations are shown alongside negative portrayals of the American nation, they play into the paradigm discussed above in relation to the episode *Two Bad Neighbors*.

In addition to the eight nations that were selected for the initial content analysis, a further eighty identifiable nations were referenced in the sample group of episodes. Their relative frequency is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Relative Frequency of References to Non-American Nations



The USA is excluded from this data, but all other referenced nations are included. Those with the highest number of individual references appear in the darkest shades of red, fading through to a very light shade for nations with one mention. 64 of the nations - the vast majority - were referenced five times or fewer, and most of those (50) were mentioned only once or twice. This indicates that *The Simpsons* focused on only a core group of non-American nations in the sample period.

Including the USA, the following table shows the only nations that were referenced more than 20 times.

1. USA	1359
2. Germany	96
3. Japan	95
4. France	93
5. India	90
6. Mexico	58
7. England	47 ⁵
8. Italy	37
9. Scotland	32
10. Australia	31
11. China	30
12. Canada	21
13. Russia	20
14. Ireland	20

The top tier of non-American nations in this group (Germany, Japan, France and India) are referenced frequently in the series. There are a variety of reasons why each of these four nations appears with relative frequency, ranging from historical events to character associations, to visits to those countries. Germany is referenced frequently during

⁵ Following the cue set by *The Simpsons* itself, England, Scotland and Ireland have been coded as separate nations. They are rarely referred to collectively (as the United Kingdom), and there is never a distinction drawn between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This is discussed further in the discourse analysis.

flashbacks by Grampa Simpson to World War II, while Adolf Hitler is also mentioned occasionally. Almost a quarter of France's mentions come from Bart's visit there during the first season episode *The Crepes of Wrath* (1.11) while the French language is used frequently by characters to indicate high-culture institutions such as galleries and restaurants. Another series of references to France are contained within the *Treehouse of Horror VIII* (9.4) vignette *The Homega Man* when Mayor Quimby makes disparaging remarks about France and Springfield is consequently bombed by the outraged French president. 40 of Japan's 95 references are from the tenth season episode *Thirty Minutes Over Tokyo* (10.23), in which the Simpsons visit Japan, while many of the others come from eating at Japanese restaurants. Finally, references to India are nearly always related to Apu Nahasapeemaitilon, with the majority coming from just three episodes. They are: Homer's trip to India with Apu in *Homer and Apu* (5.13); Apu's traditional Hindu marriage to Manjula in *The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemaitilons* (9.7); and *I'm With Cupid* (10.14), in which Apu spoils Manjula on Valentine's day. The practice of portraying nations through nationalised characters is common in *The Simpsons* and will be addressed further in the discourse analysis.

The second tier of nations (Mexico to China) are again referenced in a variety of contexts. Australia's spot in this list is earned primarily through the episode *Bart vs. Australia* (6.16). Similarly, while Scotland's references come frequently in association with the character Groundskeeper Willie, there are also many in the episode *Monty Can't Buy Me Love* (10.21), in which Mr. Burns, Willie, Homer and Professor Frink visit Scotland to capture the Loch Ness Monster. Like France, many of the references to Italy are through food, as when the Simpsons order pizza (which comes in boxes adorned with the Italian flag) or visit Luigi's restaurant. References to China, Canada and Russia/Soviet Union are scattered and oppositional. That is, they are often strongly depicted negatively or in opposition to the United States, but the references are not sustained over a group of

episodes or collected in a single episode. This is also the case for some references to Mexico, but others come through the nationalised character Bumblebee Man.

There is a distinct lack of references to African nations, as evidenced on the map in Figure 2. There were only a few references to Libya, Egypt, South Africa and a few central African nations. During the sample period, *The Simpsons* did not refer to many African nations at all, perhaps indicating a distinct lack of knowledge about the continent, its nations and inhabitants amongst the staff. It could also indicate a general discursive pattern lacking any African referents.⁶

In addition to nationalised fictional and non-fictional characters, the data collected during this content analysis shows nations are often strongly represented through one key element - their name. While gastronomy is important for a few of the nations presented (in particular France, Japan and Italy), overall it forms a small portion of references to nation in the sample. In contrast, the use of names as signifiers of nation accounts for over 42% of all data collected in this discourse analysis. References specifically to the United States account for just over half of all names recorded, which is on par with overall references to the United States compared to other nations. But interestingly, the use of a name is slightly less prominent relative to overall mentions for the United States than it is for other nations. Of course, in some cases the use of a name has accounted for historical or institutional references since those categories did not exist during the coding process. On the whole, the data suggests that names are key signifiers for the majority of nations that appear in the show. The importance of names is noted by Billig: “the magic of ‘our’ name matters to ‘us’ deeply, which national ‘we’ are: it indicates who ‘we’ are, and, more basically *that* ‘we’ are” (1995, p. 73 emphasis in original). In *The Simpsons*, the reliance on names to indicate particular nations is a core

⁶ In later seasons, *The Simpsons* has visited Africa (Turner 2012).

way of presenting those nations and conferring legitimacy on them, reinforcing the very system of nationhood.

While the appearance of flags accounts for almost 18% of all appearances of nation in *The Simpsons*, almost 92% of these occurrences were related to the United States. Indeed, appearances of the American flag accounts for almost 29% of references to America, well above the average for all other countries. This points strongly to the appearance of the flag as a banal referent to the American nation, a phenomenon that complies with Billig's theory that the nation is 'flagged' daily (1995). However:

The limp, unwaved flag and the embossed eagle are not sufficient to keep these assumptions in their place as habits of thought. These assumptions have to be flagged discursively. And for that, banal words, jingling in the ears of citizens, or passing before their eyes, are required (Billig, 1995, p. 93)

While such discursive words were not counted specifically during this content analysis, the appearance of words and terms such as 'the/our nation' were counted. Such banal words form a good portion of the references to the United States of America counted under the name category. From the evidence, there is a clear role for both flags and Billig's "complex deixis of homeland" (1995, p. 95) in representing and reminding the audience of the presence of the nation.

While English remains the dominant language in *The Simpsons*, a variety of other languages were identified during the content analysis. The most common of these was French, for the reasons identified above. However, the use of French was closely followed by the use of Spanish by Mexican characters or in contexts that seemed to be related to Mexico. These occurrences were coded as appearances of the Mexican nation, and often related to the Bumblebee Man, a bumbling comedic television personality. However, other unexpected appearances of Spanish included its use by

Bart and other members of the Simpson family, plus a Mexican relative of Ned Flanders. These instances are mostly isolated and rare. When Bumblebee Man appears, he speaks a corrupted version of Spanish interspersed with similarly corrupted English words, but the other characters seem able to understand what he says. In these appearances, the notion of an entirely monolingual United States is challenged, if only slightly, by Spanish-speaking characters and Spanish words used by other characters.

Places considered representative of the American nation appeared 70 times in the sample period, while French places appeared 38 times. For the most part, these appearances were of buildings such as the White House, the United States Congress or the Eiffel Tower. For such places to be counted in the content analysis, they had to be identifiable landmarks. Places such as explicitly identified 'national' parks were also included in the analysis. The role of specific places in standing in for nation is recognised by Billig: "For American patriots, the United States is not merely the America they know: their America is to be conceived as a unique, vast but homely, totality" (1995, p. 75). People who have never been to many of the places counted in this content analysis can recognise them as visible referents to their respective nations due to their presentation in shows like *The Simpsons* as peculiarly national objects.

The data gathered in this content analysis has identified a number of important aspects of the presentation of nation in *The Simpsons*. In addition to quantifying the relative dominance of the United States over other nations in the show, it demonstrated a clear trend to assertive Americanism from 1994-1996 and highlighted the importance of names and flags, in particular, in representing nation. The role of territory, gastronomy and national days in representing nations was equally shown to be not as important as expected, or important for only some countries.

4.3: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Oh Marge, cartoons don't have any deep meaning. They're just stupid drawings that give you a cheap laugh.

- Homer Simpson, 'Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington'

The Simpsons has a broad range of cultural and social elements from which to draw its material. It does draw widely from that milieu, finding inspiration in everything from the state of education to the military-industrial complex, presidential campaigns, religion and other pop culture products. As Turner notes, it “has much to say about a wide range of topics, but its most detailed social commentary is about itself” (2012, p. 136). Gray (2007), Cantor (1999), Dobson (2006) and Chow (2004) also make the point that *The Simpsons* is highly self-conscious. The self-referential nature of *The Simpsons* suggests that the writers are aware of the impact of the show. In fact, Dobson places this self-consciousness on a broader spectrum, theorising it to be “an epigram of the crisis of postmodern self-reflection” (2006, p. 63). A focus on self-reflection and exposing what was hidden allows and encourages sharp satirisation of subjects that might previously have been taboo (Chow, 2004). Because knowledgeable understanding is now assumed issues are explored and addressed freely. Dobson refers to this practice as evidence of a ‘carnavalesque’ approach to production: “its use of racial stereotypes is like a carnival: an opportunity to ridicule and let off steam against the piety of current political correctness but without going too far” (2006, p. 58). The observation of self-awareness is borne out by many moments within the show itself, such as Homer touching on the origins of *The Simpsons* as vignettes on a popular variety show: “Tracy Ullman was entertaining America with songs, sketches and crudely drawn filler material” (*Lisa’s Sax* 9.3). In *All Singing, All Dancing* (9.11), the Simpson family engages in a bout of musical reminiscing, but concludes at the end of the episode that

there is one thing worse than musical television: “There is something worse, and it really does blow: When a long-running series does a cheesy clip show.” This episode was the third clip show *The Simpsons* had done in only nine seasons, so the line was ironic not only in the context of season nine, but the whole series. The strong focus on self-reference suggests that its targets are both deliberately chosen and carefully covered in satire: that any prodding of specific topics is probably pointing to something else. While it may appear that the many appearances of non-American nations in *The Simpsons* consists of ‘crudely-drawn’ stereotypes, it is more likely that the show is attempting to hold up a mirror to America itself, gleefully throwing light on the audience’s own prejudices and misgivings.

In the previous section, the results of a detailed content analysis showed that there are indeed numerous manifest examples of nation in the show. These representations include information in a variety of fields, including territory/place, flags, names, gastronomy, historical figures and events and national institutions. These elements are drawn together - connected - by invisible threads that run through many seasons and episodes. This section deals more closely with a few of these discursive patterns and addresses some of the more sustained elements of nation in the show. Of particular interest is the representation of America, collapsed or simplified version of foreign nations, the way in which certain characters are allowed to speak for their nation of origin, and the politics of exclusion employed against those perceived or shown to be ‘outsiders’.

4.3.1: WELCOME TO AMERICA

America's health care system is second only to Japan, Canada, Sweden, Great Britain, well, all of Europe, but you can thank your lucky stars we don't live in Paraguay!

- Homer Simpson, 'Homer's Triple Bypass'

The United States of America (US, or America) is undoubtedly and unsurprisingly the dominant nation in *The Simpsons*, and a variety of methods are used to establish and reinforce this position. A major discursive pattern in representations of the United States consists of attempts to establish America primarily in opposition to other nations. This takes place through direct comparisons, like the section epigraph above, and broader patterns of representation of characteristics of nation. Additionally, the nation-state is banally present in a majority of scenes. In relation to a survey of non-American audience members, Gray says, "[m]ore than just being American... *The Simpsons* was seen as actively talking about America" (2007, p. 140). This observation neatly sums the dominance of America in the sample group of episodes analysed in this study.

The American nation is literally "flagged daily" (Billig, 1995) in the show, with flags being displayed an average of more than once in every episode and around 28 times in *Deep Space Homer*. In this episode, the US is in fact the only nation explicitly represented in the episode and the flags strewn around NASA buildings, uniforms and vehicles account for half of all references to America. Particularly of note in the regular flagging of the American nation in the show is the presence of unwaved flags in state-sponsored contexts like schools, courthouses, the Springfield town hall and various national monuments in Washington. In addition to the abundance of flags, the US is banally present in the everyday language of many of the characters. Importantly, the use of such terms also helps to establish the discursive dichotomy between the US and other nations:

‘the people’ is a discursive formation, which is used synonymously with the nation. The world, in which ‘the sovereignty of the people’ is to be politically realized, is a world of different nations: it is a world which has institutionalized ‘them’ and ‘us’ (Billig, 1995, p. 94)

The institutionalisation of this dichotomy is evident in much of the representation of nation in *The Simpsons*. In *Trash of the Titans* (9.22), Homer-the-election-candidate takes political rhetoric to a new level, telling his audience: “Animals are crapping in our houses and we’re picking up after them.” The cause of this disgrace can only be one thing, as Homer continues, “Did we lose a war?” The war must have been fought between nations, and powerful nations at that, if this was the result. But, of course, it’s only part of the rhetoric, and Homer finishes with a flourish: “That’s not America. That’s not even Mexico!” By Homer’s logic, not even America’s southern neighbour would allow humans to pick up after animals. The dichotomy of nations hardly ends there. To encourage Ralph Wiggum to brush his teeth in *Last Exit to Springfield* (4.17), Simpson family dentist Dr Wolfe shows Ralph ‘The Big Book of British Smiles’, which contains numerous pictures of disfigured (British) mouths. Presumably, there were not enough American mouths to fill the book. To get cash for a new comic book, Bart trades in a set of souvenir Bolivian coins, asking the clerk to “Americanize” his money (*Three Men and a Comic Book* 2.21). Homer disobeys Lisa’s warning that the food he is about to eat expired two years earlier “according to the Mexican Council of Food”. He tells her: “Sure, by their standards. But this is America” before gulping it down (*Thirty Minutes Over Tokyo* 10.23). Homer’s blind patriotism (and stupidity, it must be said) causes him red tide poisoning, but not before the discursive pattern of defining America in opposition to other nations is once again reinforced.

Writing of the use of language in fictional television to contest and define stateless nations, Castello notes that the use of only Welsh in many serials “banalizes a reality that does not exist” (2009, p. 309). Similarly, in Catalan

television, the “scarce presence of the Spanish language does not reflect the bilingual reality of this stateless nation” (ibid). A similar discourse of a monolingual US can be seen to exist in *The Simpsons*. While there are numerous uses of non-English languages, these are rarely used in American contexts. Usually, the use of a non-English language indicates an explicit reference to another nation and was counted as such in the content analysis. US census data shows that in 2007, almost 20% of US residents spoke languages other than English at home (Shin & Kominski, 2010). Further, the states with the highest concentration of those who speak languages other than English - especially Spanish - are in the south and southeastern regions of the country. They are Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, California and Florida (ibid). Texas, New Mexico and California, in particular, have Spanish speaking populations of between 22.2% and 29.3% (ibid). This is important because many of the references to Springfield’s location – contradictory, obfuscated and fictional as they are – have the town in the south/southeast of the US.⁷ The monolingual reality presented on *The Simpsons* is another example of banal nationalism being used to create, recreate, reinforce and represent the imagined communities (nations) in the series. However, it is worth noting there is one character that often steps beyond the banal monolingual milieu of the show – Bumblebee Man. This bumbling character, and some very brief uses of Spanish by other characters, do challenge the monolingual image, but only very slightly, and not to the extent that would be suggested by the information cited above if realistic portrayals of American life were being attempted.

⁷ See the fan website *The Simpson Archive* (www.snpp.com) for more information. In particular, every shred of evidence for Springfield’s location from the show has been collated at this page: <http://www.snpp.com/guides/springfield.list.html>.

4.3.2: THE OUTSIDE WORLD

As I'm sure you remember, in the late 1980s the US experienced a short-lived infatuation with Australian culture. For some bizarre reason, the Aussies thought this would be a permanent thing. Of course, it wasn't.

- Evan Conover, US State Department (Brat and Punk Division), Bart vs. Australia.

Representing non-American nations in *The Simpsons* often comes down to displaying a grab bag of well-worn stereotypes. The show relies on collapsing complex histories, cultures and governments into either a few sound bites or frames and having a regular Simpsonian laugh at them. The message for the audience is obvious - 'you should laugh too, even if you're the one being laughed at'. Hall highlights exactly how the practice works: "Stereotypes get hold of the few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characteristics about a person, *reduce* everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and *fix* them without change or development" (1997, p. 258 emphasis in original). Over the course of the ten-year sample, some of the characters that initially seemed to be purely composed of stereotypes have evolved. Others have not. Two examples, Apu and Willie, are discussed in the next section. While some characters might have become more nuanced, the stereotypical representations of nations have rarely changed, and they are at least as pervasive as stereotyped characters. Turner argues that the practice is a "satirical device", meant as "a broad comment on the insular nature of American society" (2012, p. 115). The general self-awareness of *The Simpsons* supports this assertion. One of the stronger stereotypes regularly displayed is the appearance, behaviours and husky accents of the (Italian) mafia characters that inhabit Springfield. None more openly sums up the self-referential nature of their roles than the ageing mafia boss Don Vittorio DiMaggio, who told Krusty and Homer: "You have brought great joy to this old Italian stereotype" (*Homie the Clown*, 6.15).

Staff from the show have also explicitly acknowledged the use of stereotypes in representing countries, as the following exchange between Matt Groening, writer Donick Cary and supervising producer Ron Hauge shows:

Cary: It always seemed like an easy way to do a show. 'The Simpsons go to: pick a place.' They picked Japan...

Groening: And then we go to whatever the place is and offend the locals. And... apologize for the next several years.

Cary: Well I think the bigger problem is our lack of research.

Ron Hauge: I've never been to one place we've done on the show. It's all stereotype and hearsay.

(DVD commentary, *Thirty Minutes Over Tokyo*)

The stereotypes of nation are self-conscious and deliberate. They are also the product of a certain mischievous nonchalance by the writers and other staff. Though the stereotypes are presented in this vein, Dobson argues that they still cause distress, drawing mostly on reactions to the episodes *Blame it on Lisa* (13.15), which was set in Brazil, and *Bart vs. Australia* (6.16) as his evidence: "television audiences are sensitive to the national stereotypes portrayed in a seemingly innocuous animated comedy" (2006, p. 48). This section further sketches out the appearance of a few foreign nations over the course of the sample period, highlighting the use of stereotypes and the practice of collapsing or ignoring complex details.

One nation-state that is very clearly the subject of a simplified discourse in *The Simpsons* is the United Kingdom. The term 'United Kingdom' is rarely mentioned and the terms 'British' or 'Britain' are used less often than individual references to Ireland, England or Scotland.⁸ Billig, in discussing

⁸ Wales is never individually mentioned in the sample.

the importance of names, suggests that a similar practice might be also evident in the non-Simpsons world:

Significantly, the official title, the 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland', is hardly used by its inhabitants... The pair 'Britain/British' is more frequently used, although the English will unthinkingly substitute 'England/English' for the wider term (1995, p. 78).

While the constituent parts of the United Kingdom (that is, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) might be considered what Castello (2009) would term "stateless" nations, they are nevertheless part of a single nation state, but that is rarely acknowledged in *The Simpsons*. Not only is the official nation-state largely ignored, so too are any possible differences between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The appearance of three separate stateless nations in the place of one United Kingdom nonetheless reinforces the very concept of imagined national communities.

While the UK might not be the nation that is imagined in *The Simpsons*, three others - its constituent parts - are referenced regularly. And, as with the appearance of many other non-American nations in the sample, each of these three is often represented through stereotype. The 'Big Book of British Smiles' is one strong example of this practice. Other examples come often at the expense of (Scottish) Groundskeeper Willie, whose flaming red bushy eyebrows and beard seem to befit a violent, uneducated immigrant who works in a menial job. Willie is discussed further below. Ireland is referenced almost entirely through stereotype, such as when riots break out in Springfield on St Patrick's Day, spurring the police to invoke laws prohibiting alcohol (*Homer vs. the Eighteenth Amendment*, 8.18). As drunken louts climb the broadcast tower behind newsreader Kent Brockman, he addresses the audience:

Ladies and Gentleman, what you're seeing is a total disregard for the things St Patrick's Day stands for. All this drinking, violence, destruction of property. Are these the things we think of when we think of the Irish?

The joke is on the Irish, of course, as Springfield's residents wholeheartedly embrace those things that they think St Patrick's Day stands for. Before the violence, a float in the St Patrick's Day parade celebrates the 'Drunken Irish Novelists of Springfield', while Moe has a sign displayed in his bar reading 'Help Wanted: No Irish'. Presumably, Irish employees could not be trusted with either the alcohol or the till. For those that have so far missed the joke, a pub adorned with the British flag is blown up, referencing the Irish Republican Army's campaign against British colonialism. When Mr. Burns announces a plan to capture the Loch Ness Monster, he promises something "man has searched for since the dawn of time" (*Monty Can't Buy Me Love* 10.21). Homer innocently asks, "A sober Irishman?" And Burns responds, "Even rarer." The stereotype could not be more obvious.

Like the UK, all the complexity of Japan has been broken down to a few key stereotypes. The most prominent of these is Dobson's observation that "Japan is regularly portrayed as technologically and economically advanced in contrast to the United States" (2006, p. 53). The industrious and advanced Japanese culture stuns the Simpsons when they visit in *Thirty Minutes Over Tokyo* (10.23), with Marge especially keen to see a Japanese club sandwich, which she imagines would be "smaller and more efficient." Homer is equally impressed by the futuristic toilet in his hotel room, exclaiming, "they're years ahead of us." When the Simpsons visit an American restaurant in Tokyo, the waiter assures them that he is an "average American Joe". He attempts to prove this by claiming, "I don't know anything! I'm product of American education system. I also build poor-quality cars and inferior-style electronics." The contrast between the

two nations further establishes the reflexive practices attendant in representing nation in *The Simpsons*. The stereotype of an advanced society is taken to its logical conclusion when Homer purchases a square watermelon for US\$150. The price and shape of the fruit indicates both positive and negative aspects of the stereotype - it is efficient and a notable achievement, but achievement can prohibitively expensive and, when it regains its shape so suddenly that Homer drops it, unworkable and impractical. In another episode, all Homer's brother has to do to ensure his cars sell well is give them Japanese names (*Brother, Can You Spare Two Dimes?* 3.24). This is not the only stereotype about Japan in *The Simpsons*, but it is by far the most common discursive structure in the show. Dobson has further divided appearances of Japan in *The Simpsons* into two categories: stereotypical/ignorant and witty/knowledgeable (2006). However, the other stereotypes raised are drawn almost exclusively from a single episode (*Thirty Minutes Over Tokyo*) and are not nearly as dominant in the overall discourse of the show as the technological-industrious image.

4.3.3: NATIONAL CHARACTERS

As the top student in my graduating class of 7 million, I was accepted for graduate study in the United States.

- Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, 'Much Apu About Nothing'

Beyond his role as a shopkeeper - which he holds in the show presumably only because of his ethnicity - little is shown of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon until *Homer the Heretic* (4.3). Before this appearance, he is background filler, characterised only by his enthusiastic service, his chirpy catchphrase ("thank you, come again") and his ability to do things that convenience store shopkeepers are expected to do like being on the receiving end of an armed robbery. In *Homer the Heretic*, Apu reveals that he worships the Hindu god Ganesh. Later in the same episode, Apu is shown also to be a volunteer firefighter who arrives to save Homer as the Simpson home

burns. After the fire is out, Reverend Lovejoy tells Homer that God was “working in the hearts of your friends and neighbors when they came to your aid, be they [pointing to Ned Flanders] Christian, [pointing to Krusty the Clown] Jew, or [pointing to Apu] ... miscellaneous.” Apu’s indignant response is to tell Lovejoy that there are 700 million Hindus in the world, but Lovejoy is unperturbed: “Oh, that’s super.” His condescension is palpable. Despite this rocky introduction to a more well-rounded Apu, from here on in his character is given more time and more detail. In *Homer and Apu* (5.13), he is fired from the Kwik-E-Mart and comes to live with the Simpsons. They grow fond of Apu and he journeys with Homer to India to ask the mystic, Gandhi-like global head of the Kwik-E-Mart to be reinstated. The parody of Indian people in this episode becomes a little more sustained with references like the Air India logo promising to “treat you like cattle”, simultaneously referencing and skewering Hindu reverence of cattle and a common perception of public transport on the Indian subcontinent severely overflowing with people. Turner agrees that by this point that “the show’s take on Indian culture has grown considerably more sensitive and knowing” (2012, p. 116). He cites specifically a brief but informed discussion between Homer and Apu on karma as an example of this. *The Simpsons* uses Apu to introduce and parody India in this episode without merely reducing the country to vague stereotypes. Despite being portrayed as Hindu in some detail in *Homer the Heretic*, *Much Apu About Nothing* (7.23) and *The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemepetitions* (9.7), Apu is occasionally shown wearing a Sikh turban. The mixing of these two distinct religions - both of which are usually associated with India - further underlines Apu’s role as a proxy for the Indian nation. However, it is also an example of the stereotyping common to many characters in *The Simpsons*.

Lisa the Vegetarian (7.5) further sketches out Apu’s character, filling in details like his long-term friendship with Paul and Linda McCartney and his own vegetarianism. The next episode in which Apu is heavily featured is

Much Apu About Nothing, which provides sustained comment on exclusionary practices and othering in the show in addition offering more detail about Apu's heritage and history. Apu's parents are introduced for the first time, in a flashback where they tell him to make them proud. The audience is told that he has a PhD (but still works in the convenience store) and that he is living in America on an expired visa. Apu is further detailed in *The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemetilons*, in which he reluctantly agrees to an arranged marriage with Manjula. Despite their reservations, the couple agree they can "always get a divorce", to which Apu says: "God bless America", showing that he has come to terms with his dual nationality. As Turner notes, "Apu's job at the Kwik-E-Mart, his Indian heritage, his Hindu faith - these have now become *details* of his character, not defining traits" (2012, p. 116 emphasis in original). Each of these details now contributes more fully to a rounded image of Apu as a leading character amongst the pantheon of Springfieldians. Along the way, the representation of India has also become more nuanced.

Groundskeeper Willie is another character who defines a nation as he himself is defined. Like Apu's India, Scotland is experienced primarily through Willie. Unlike Apu, Willie *is* represented through vague and often unimaginative stereotypes. When Mr. Burns, Homer and Professor Frink take a trip there to capture the Loch Ness Monster (*Monty Can't Buy Me Love*, 10.21), who else would accompany them? Willie is there because they are in Scotland, and it gives him a chance to live up to some further Scottish stereotypes. Homer sees a Scottish couple watching the activities by the shore of Loch Ness and says to Willie: "That old couple looks just like you." Willie responds that they are his parents, adding: "They own a tavern hereabouts. They still have the same pool table on which I was conceived, born, and educated." Willie's uncouth behaviour suddenly makes a lot more sense - it is because of his upbringing. The implication is that Willie is typical of Scots. But the joke doesn't end there, as Willie then has a brief reunion with his parents.

Ma: So, you're back, son.

Willie: Aye.

Pa: I suppose you'll be leaving soon.

Willie: Aye.

[All shrug and part]

Despite being away from home for many years, this is the extent of his interaction with his parents. The whole passage stereotypes Scots as uncivil, with Willie being an eminent example of the same.

Twice Willie is represented as a pervert - first in *Homer Badman* (6.9) and then in *Thirty Minutes Over Tokyo* (10.23). In *Homer Badman* (6.9), Willie's practice of videotaping Springfield's residents saves Homer from sexual harassment charges but earns himself the moniker 'Rowdy Roddy Peeper' courtesy of a sleazy current affairs program. As Willie shows the Simpson family the tape that will save Homer, he tells them:

My hobby is secretly videotaping couples in cars. I dinna come forward because in this country, it makes you look like a pervert, but every single Scottish person does it!

Here, the stereotyping is ratcheted up a notch. Rather than leaving it to be gleaned from inference, Willie explicitly states what makes his nation deviant. Importantly, Scotland is also set up in an oppositional binary with the United States, further strengthening the observation that each nation is defined in opposition - or reflexively - to others. As *Thirty Minutes Over Tokyo* opens, Willie is at Springfield's internet cafe the Java Hut viewing a website boasting an 'up-kilt camera'. As the image loads from behind a British flag⁹, Willie commentates it for the viewer: "Ew, this lass needs a bit

⁹ Incidentally, this scene is the only time in the sample that the United Kingdom was equated with Scotland.

of groundskeeping,” he opines, before the kicker: “Ah, that’s Willie!” The amateur videographer has become the subject of someone else’s video. Willie in his kilt (sans underwear) is not an unusual occurrence on *The Simpsons*, and the joke is not only made for the audience’s benefit: it is also often for the amusement of other characters. In *Bart’s Girlfriend* (6.7), Willie forms an unwitting part of Principal Skinner’s plan to set up Bart for detention. At a fake ‘Scotchtoberfest’ event, Willie delivers a lecture on Scottish culture: “Now the kilt was only for day-to-day wear. In battle, we donned a full-length ball gown covered in sequins. The idea was to blind your opponent with luxury.” As Willie speaks, Bart sneaks up behind him and ties helium-filled balloons to the kilt, lifting it skyward. Willie stands proudly as the crowd reacts with gasps (one woman faints): “Ach! ‘Tis no more than what God gave me, you puritan pukes!” Now, in addition to being uncouth, uncivil and perverted, *The Simpsons* derides the kilt and Willie is emasculated. Turner argues that “Willie’s nationality becomes incidental: he’s much more cartoon than Scot” (2012, p. 115). But this misses the point, though Turner backs it up by noting that Willie’s “most famous sobriquet - *cheese-eating surrender monkeys* - has nothing to do with Scotland and everything to do with American prejudice” (ibid). As the primary touchstone and the only regular voice of Scotland, Willie has come to represent his nation. Whatever Willie does - be it outbursts of violence or taking great pleasure in using his bare hands to unclog a toilet - he speaks for Scotland. More broadly, the representations of Willie as a Scot underlines the discussion above about the United Kingdom and the general notion that *The Simpsons* reinforces the very concept of nation as imagined community argued by Anderson.

4.3.4: CLOSING THE BORDERS

People, your taxes are high because of illegal immigrants. We need to get rid of them.

- Mayor Quimby, 'Much Apu About Nothing'

Springfield is a fictional imagined community that in large part reflects the mores and proclivities of its own larger non-fictional imagined community, the United States of America. As Anderson notes, beyond the borders of any nation "lie other nations" (1991). A key argument in this study is that those nations are not just actually outside of the dominant nation, but are discursively placed there and represented as inferior or deviant through exclusionary oppositional binaries. Many representations of nation in *The Simpsons* relate to positioning non-American nations as the subjugant in an oppositional binary. This process discursively establishes the United States as the discursively dominant nation in the binary. Some of the methods of this oppositional imagining have been noted above, and relate partly to the practice of stereotyping. Said argues that outsiders are caricatured and compressed images that "represent or stand in for a very large entity, otherwise impossibly diffuse which they enable one to grasp or see. They are also *characters*, related to such types as the braggarts, misers or gluttons" (Said 1978: 66, emphasis in original). The practice of representing nation in *The Simpsons* comes to be one of simplification, as addressed above. The second part of this quote, the "braggarts, misers [and] gluttons" of Said's description, are the subjugant others. The term "other" raises the prospect of others who are not necessarily foreign national others (Beard, 2004). However, for the purposes of this study, it is sufficient to acknowledge such others, and note that their appearance should be further examined in other research.

The practice of othering in *The Simpsons* relates to Turner's observation that "for all its many humanist trappings, for all the universal themes it deals with, *The Simpsons* becomes most chauvinistically American when it

leaves the United States” (2012, p. 114). The show works hardest to represent America as the dominant nation when it is explicitly representing other nations. Beard contends the episode *Homer and Apu* (5.13) does just this, transplanting the two title characters to India for the purposes of skewering the American convenience store (2004). While parodies of convenience stores are evident in this episode, it does also address the representation of India (often through Apu himself, as addressed above), and discursively positions India as different and subjugant to the United States. The appearance of India here might be somewhat sympathetic, but it also presumes to know India through Apu and to be able to present the nation for the audience. When *The Simpsons* visit Australia (in *Bart vs. Australia*), the parody of Australian culture and people is very strong but it is Bart’s ignorance (and arguably America’s ignorance) that causes the real conflict. Bart has never heard about the Southern Hemisphere, let alone any of the countries in it, until Lisa shows him a globe. The apparently insular nature of America is on display, and though it might seem negative, Bart and Homer are comfortable with their ignorance. American dominance is assured because Americans have no desire to look beyond their borders. When the Simpsons leave Australia at the end of the episode, they observe with delight that Bart’s bullfrogs are destroying crops. The lone koala clinging to the undercarriage of the helicopter seems sinister, but is unlikely to actually do any damage to the United States. Beard describes the practice: “While America’s insularity is often parodied... anything ‘foreign’ is thus relegated to the status of stereotype or caricature in order for this parody to function” (2004, p. 286). The simplification takes place in order to assure the US of discursive dominance.

Beard argues that Apu is represented as both “fully” American *and* foreign national ‘other’ through his “deracianation and incorporation into mainstream consumer culture” and the show’s “less-than-critical adherence to stereotypical American mass-media representations of

Indians” (2004, p. 282). The dichotomy present in Apu’s appearance on the show is most clearly borne out in the episode *Much Apu About Nothing* (7.23), where Springfield’s prejudices are at their most vocal. In this episode, the Mayor ‘Diamond’ Joe Quimby deflects a fear of bears in into a campaign against immigrants. The town’s residents prepare to vote on a proposition to kick all “illegal” immigrants out of Springfield, and Homer places a sign in Apu’s shop satirising American military recruitment posters and titled “We want you... out!” Even the bartender Moe Szyslak is forced to take a citizenship test, despite his loud protestations against people he calls “immigrants”, who he decries because “[t]hey wants all the benefits of living in Springfield, but they ain’t even bother to learn themselves the language.” Moe’s origins in this episode are deliberately obfuscated, and in others in the sample it is suggested he is British or Italian. Dr Nick Riviera and Groundskeeper Willie are others for whom the borders are closing, though Willie is the only person who is shown subsequently being deported. But it is Apu who most precariously straddles the border between American and other in this episode, struggling to fully reconcile the two. In an attempt to stay in America in the face of the proposition, he purchases a forged passport from the Italian mobster Fat Tony, who tells Apu he is now from Green Bay and that his parents are named “Herb and Judy Nahasapeemapetilon.” Apu promptly decks out the Kwik-E-Mart in American flags and dons a New York Mets baseball cap and a broad American drawl. Homer seems surprised by the new Apu who serves him, but Apu cannot keep up the charade. He decides to take a citizenship test instead and shows that he is more knowledgeable about America’s history than many of the ‘all American’ characters. The politics in this episode are complex, but the overriding narrative positions Apu and the other “illegal” immigrants as not-wholly-American. Exclusionary practices are obvious and pervasive.

There is a strong tendency in *The Simpsons* to use appearances of non-American nations not only as reflexive tools in the imagining of America

but as literal counterpoints to America's best interests. In *The Cartridge Family* (9.5), Homer decides to buy a gun to protect his family, but is forced to argue the efficacy of his decision to Lisa: "But I have to get a gun! It's in the Constitution," Homer tells her (once again invoking a little word – "the" of "the Constitution" – that banally signals America). Lisa assures her dad that "the Second Amendment is just a relic from Revolutionary days", but he insists: "If I didn't have this gun, the King of England could just walk in here any time he wants and just start shoving you around." Here, Homer has taken a clichéd expression and turned it to his own purposes – protection of his family. In *Homer's Enemy* (8.23), Homer is told off by co-worker Frank Grimes for his general approach to life:

You're what's wrong with America, Simpson. You coast through life, you do as little as possible, and you leech off decent, hardworking people like me. Heh, if you lived in any other country in the world, you'd have starved to death long ago.

Sloane argues this scene is emblematic of American capitalism, with Grimes representing an ingrained belief in "work" (2004). However, it also shows up a critique of America itself. Homer is unaware of his surroundings, and cares little for the struggles of others. Again, the contrast between what is good for America and what is good for other nations is evident. Beard offers other examples that "conjure up the specter of the security of national boundaries" (2004, p. 287). He writes that in *The Crepes of Wrath* (1.11), "an Albanian character spies on the United States... at the same time as Bart is victimized by a duo of malevolent Frenchmen" (ibid). In *Marge In Chains* (4.21), "the obsessive work practices of the Japanese threaten the health of the inhabitants of Springfield when a batch of imported juicers is infected with the 'Osaka flu'" (ibid). All of these representations are used to position America in a dominant oppositional position in relation to other nations. The Albanians

are out to get America while the French are out to get the American and so on.

Through regular oppositional positioning and exclusionary practices, *The Simpsons* carefully 'others' non-American characters and nations. This occurs despite the self-referential nature of the show. Further, the practice reinforces the very ontology of nationhoods contained within the show. America is not just established through reflexive positioning against other nations – it is also established by discursive dominance over those nations.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In *Boy Scoutz 'N the Hood* (5.8), Bart and Milhouse have too much sugar and decide to “go crazy Broadway style.” They sing (to the show-tune *New York, New York*) that Springfield is “a hell of a town”. It sure is. Springfield is a town full of interesting and diverse characters, impossible geography and landscapes and fascinating organisations. In this setting, the appearance of nation has been thoroughly categorised and analysed. Its frames and discourses have been interrogated and contested. A presupposed set of content categories was developed applied to collect data, but *The Simpsons* was able to clearly establish its own priorities and practices for displaying nations. The importance of the identified categories of territory and language was clear, while the role of flags and names was dominant. Two other identified categories (gastronomy and national days) were absent almost completely from the sample, while two others could not be ignored. Through regular references to armies, legislatures and other ‘national’ or nationalised bodies, the role of institutions in *The Simpsons* was strongly established. Historical figures like national leaders, past and contemporary, were also dominant aspects of the discourse of nation.

For Anderson (1999), the eternal nature of nations is most strongly manifested in regular references to unborn future generations and long-dead nationalised ancestors. Children stand in for the unborn by virtue of their sexual and political innocence, while monuments represent the ancestral dead. Both groups, for Anderson, have acquired an “abstract” national quality: “one is told nothing about them in any sociological, political or genealogical sense” (1999: 202). Anderson considers the innocence of children briefly in light of *Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington* (3.2), and suggests the only character who can be a “real patriot” is “an innocent little blockhead (Lisa)” (1999: 201). It is Lisa who believes the system really works, and proclaims as much, in the end, while everyone else is left

to know that it does not. As Anderson puts it: "It is as if the 'real America' is the ghastly father, the dithering mother, and the bratty son - and Lisa is quite set apart" (ibid). The functioning, eternal and just nation-state is quite imagined. The nation is not entirely a fiction, but its most endearing characteristics are. In *The Simpsons*, as in Billig's wrestling (1995), the nation's banality is a major factor in its imagining. So too are its practices of exclusion.

Though it might be an obvious statement, that *The Simpsons* does not sit within a cultural vacuum is clear. It cannot be set apart from the politics of nation or exclusion. Its milieu is Billig's "world of nation-states" (1995: 6) - even though it might seek to distance itself from that world occasionally. The values of nation are embedded within every episode. And it is not only the American nation referenced in the discourse. If, as Homer tells us in *Trash of the Titans*, "that's not America, that's not even Mexico", then it has to be somewhere else, and that somewhere else is most likely to be a nation. Each nation is defined primarily in opposition to other nations. The American nation tends to be established as the dominant and superior edge of an oppositional binary with other nations, which in turn are represented with less-than-sophisticated stereotypes and simplifications. When *The Simpsons* does undertake an incisive and nuanced interrogation of the issues of representation of nation, this is usually tempered with much more casual uses of stock-standard stereotypes.

While this study has, in part, answered Billig's call for more work on the appearance of nation in popular texts, there are many questions still to answer. This analysis has focused on the discursive structures in *The Simpsons*, highlighting and teasing out the practices of representing nation - indeed, the very ontology of nation - encoded into the text. The appearance of national identity amongst Springfield's pantheon of characters was avoided, deliberately, even though characters-as-nations were discussed. This is a matter for further research, which would be

embedded more in a context of work surrounding national identity instead of nation. The audience reception and contestation of these discourses is also worthy of consideration. This work has touched on less than half of the available episodes of *The Simpsons*, not to mention other influential television and popular culture artifacts. There is still much to be considered at the intersection of nations and nationalism in the town of Springfield and elsewhere in those United States. Beyond that, nations and sub- and supra-nations are being imagined in television and popular culture elsewhere around the world, and these representations are no less worthy of consideration. There is work to be done too in the consideration of religio-national entities and racialised nations, neither of which ought to be excluded from the concept of nation just because they do not match dominant descriptions about the modern, (western) geo-political entities known as nation-states.

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