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L'exception française: Exploring the Notion of Nation

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The term *l'exception française* originally conveyed the belief that the demand for human rights and social welfare was unique in its insight and place in French national culture. Yet this expression has since given way to contentious notions of cultural purity, resistance to the perceived effacement of French culture and criticism of supposedly “foreign” intrusions within that culture. The failed EU referendum, the 2005 riots and the heated 2007 presidential election have only added to the debate surrounding the term and its usefulness: today, José Bové is as much a proponent of the *exception française* as Jean-Marie Le Pen.

With all of this in mind, our November 2006 conference set out to explore the meaning, manipulation and treatment of *l'exception française* over time. Papers and subsequent discussions debated the role this notion has had and continues to play in concepts of French culture. Our keynote speakers, Dudley Andrew and Tyler Stovall, delivered addresses that spoke to the term's presence in concepts of French cinema and identity politics. Our graduate student contributors to this issue represent the variety of subjects within French Studies that continue to struggle with *l'exception française*. From film to painting to queer studies, our participants analyze the ways in which the notion of *l'exception* plays a role in the French imaginary.

Maud Hilaire Schenker begins with a case study of nineteenth-century nationalist Maurice Barrès. Through close readings of his works, she argues that French national identity is founded less on universal absolutes than on the need for governments to assert their particular vision of the nation while attributing any weaknesses to minority groups or foreign adversaries. In a similar vein, Nicole Casi's work on agrarian tropes in films of the Occupation reveals how French farmers were used in conflicting cinematic portrayals of French life

during the Second World War. Her analyses show how founding national ideas such as the French exception break down when they become all things to all people. Postwar French artists were particularly sensitive to the challenges of maintaining France's artistic heritage, as Rhiannon Vogl demonstrates in her study of the anti-American bent of several artists and movements of the postwar decades.

Moving toward solutions to the problems presented by *l'exception française*, Olivia Gunn's theoretical reading of André Gide and Jean Genet breaks down the notion of "queerness" until it becomes an alternative way out of the tensions between normative ideals of Frenchness or citizenship. The increasingly important issue of *laïcité* in French educational policy inspired Mireille le Breton's study of its double standards and the ways in which educators and students have begun to carve out their own discourse for tolerance in the debate between religion and secular French society. Finally, Manuella Tavares's narrative of her own visit to Los Angeles provides a foil against which she tests more famous French perceptions of American culture(s). Her conclusions prove, as did our entire conference, the impossibility of narrowing any national identity into a single expression even as such goals appear to become more pressing in an ever-globalizing world.

~May 15, 2007

L'exception française
Negotiating Identity in the
French National Imagery

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French and Francophone Studies
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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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