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Internal orientalism in America: W.J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* and the spatial construction of American national identity

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to establish a framework for investigating the spatial construction of national identity, using the case of the US. The concept of internal orientalism is used to analyze representations of the South as an internal spatial "other" in the US and to suggest a link between these representations and the construction of a privileged national identity. While scholars have explored the role of internal othering in the production of national identities, these studies have either ignored space or treated it as a subordinate component. I argue for the utility of considering the primacy of space (in the sense of the imagined space of a region within the state) in the construction of national identity. Through an analysis of the influential book *The Mind of the South* I attempt to discern the relationship between the identity of the South and that of America. Portrayals of the South such as Cash's denote the

South as the repository of a set of negative characteristics (such as poverty, racism, violence, and backwardness), and I argue that as a result, these undesirable traits are excised from the national identity. According to this argument, the geographic ideas “America” and “the South” are opposite poles of a binary, and the identity of one cannot be understood except as linked to the identity of the other; therefore, representations of a degenerate South inform an exalted national identity.



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Keywords

Internal orientalism; Nationalism; America; The South; National identity

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