

AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE PROGRESS OF THE NEW SOUTH IN *NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE**

DAVID R. JANSSON

ABSTRACT. This article examines how *National Geographic Magazine's* coverage of the U.S. South contributed to the production of an exalted American national identity. The framework of internal orientalism is employed to explain the role of the South as an internal other in the national discourse and to show how even positive representations of the South are often implicated in this othering. In the pages of *National Geographic*, the New South's progress is measured by the steps it takes away from the Old South. In highlighting the improvements made within the South, the articles provide subtle hints that the legacy of segregation, intolerance, racism, and poverty continues to haunt the region. The articles set up a spatial distinction that construes these evils as inherently southern problems, which implies that however far the New South moves away from the problematic legacy of the Old South, it will never quite reach the American ideal. *Keywords:* America, internal orientalism, national identity, regional identity, U.S. South, United States.

From the earliest days of the United States, the South has been portrayed as different from the rest of the country. One scholar connects this differentiation to the interest of the new American state in shedding its image as a colony (Greeson 1999); one way this was accomplished was through projecting any vestiges of colonialism onto the South. These eighteenth-century representations were largely negative, but in the past 200 years negative representations of the South have alternated with positive ones that glorified particular values the South was held to embody (Kirby 1986).

Negative representations of the South have been seen as contributing to the construction of an exalted American national identity (Woodward 1971a; Gerster and Cords 1977; Ayers 1996; Jansson 2003). By contrasting itself with a racist, violent, poor, intolerant, and xenophobic South, America comes to know itself as personifying the opposite traits; hence Americans are enlightened, peaceful, prosperous, tolerant, and cosmopolitan. But what of the positive representations of the South? It is reasonable to suggest that these would undermine the impact of the negative representations and reduce the extent to which the South is considered different from and inferior to the national mold.

Through an analysis of *National Geographic Magazine* articles on the South, I explore the extent to which positive representations of the South, through the way they subtly remind the reader about the South's historical burdens, serve the construction of a positive American national identity as effectively as overtly negative

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✉ MR. JANSSON is a doctoral candidate in geography at Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania 16802.