

The figure of the South and the nationalizing imperatives of early United States literature.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**The Figure of the South and the Nationalizing Imperatives of Early United States Literature**

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The development of postcolonial theory in recent decades has seemed necessarily to impact the study of United States culture, since the U.S. has its own colonial origins. But the American path to nationhood significantly deviated from the foundational paradigm of postcolonial studies, the model of twentieth-century nationalization in “the Orient,” in which native inhabitants wrested or inherited governance of the lands in question from European occupiers. In the case of the United States, nationalization instead was achieved when British colonialists seceded from London’s authority while maintaining their own control of American territory. Postcolonial approaches, then, stand as both relevant to and inadequate for describing the U.S. situation in the late eighteenth century, a paradox that has led many early Americanists to consider the rebelling thirteen colonies as simultaneously occupying both terms of the imperialist binary, at the same time colonized (*vis-à-vis* the British) and colonizing (*vis-à-vis* the American Indians).<sup>1</sup> Rather than thus retroactively applying the central bifurcation of postcolonial theory to the case of the U.S., this essay attempts to analyze the foundation of U.S. nationalism out of colonial origins on what are to a greater extent its own terms.

The declaration of U.S. independence from British rule entailed a corresponding representational (r)evolution. To prove the nationhood of the rebelling colonies, U.S. partisans dispensed with established European understandings of New World possessions, and constructed instead new descriptions of a nation new to the face of the earth. My extensive work with the earliest U.S. literary texts, however, indicates that this transformation of descriptive terms did not involve a complete exchange of one set of conventions for another. Instead, in the literary magazines, geographies, histories, and novels of the nationalizing period—all of which were published north of Maryland in the 1770s, 1780s, and 1790s—early U.S. writers consistently amalgamated the five southernmost states of the new union (Maryland through Georgia) into a totalized figure of “the South,” which they differentiated from the U.S. at large based upon its residual coloniality. In other words, the new vocabulary of nationhood engineered by early national writers involved

not simply *replacing* the colonial tropes previously used to figure the New World colonies in general, but also *displacing* those tropes onto the south of the newly forming U.S. This argument transforms the conventional chronology and genealogy of the idea of “the South” in U.S. culture, calling into question the widely accepted claim of **[End Page 209]** historians and literary critics that no “South” existed before 1820–1830 and the rise of sectionalist politics. To the contrary, I have found that an unambiguous concept of “the South”—as a cohesive figure differentiated from the nation-at-large—antedated not only sectionalism, but also even the founding of the federal state in U.S. national culture.<sup>2</sup> For producers and consumers of early national print, the differentiated figure of “the South” was a clear imaginative reality from the very beginning of U.S. nationhood, despite the actual integration of the southern states in national politics and economics at this time.

I propose, then, that reading earliest U.S. print culture with an eye to the nationalizing imperatives at stake in it yields a newly complex consideration of the imagination of nation in the immediate post-colonial period in the United States. The consistent and pervasive relocation of colonial attributes onto the figure of the south in early national literature suggests that the nationalization of the United States was built in part upon an intra-national, regionally inflected symbolic geography, in which the terms “South” and “U.S.” formed an ideological juxtaposition. This nation/south rhetorical structure presents an unexpected form of post-colonial nationhood, not anticipated by current theory, in which the internal cultural colonization of the southern states of the U.S. was coupled with their full political participation in the national project. The nation/south construct also disrupts the conceptual binaries of post colonial theory—center/periphery, metropole/colony, colonizing/colonized—providing instead a tantalizing glimpse of a triangulated definition of...



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