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“I PREFER TO LOOK FORWARD”:

POSITIONING THE U.S. SOUTH IN THE TIME OF BARACK OBAMA¹

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Abstract: *Historically, the South has represented the past in a schema of U.S. nation-time. In the period roughly concurrent with the writing of William Faulkner (the late 1920s to 1950s) representations of the South’s pastness, as Leigh Ann Duck has argued, reflected a United States anxious both about losing certain southern cultures and anxious to move beyond them. Building on Duck’s important theorization, this essay seeks to evaluate more contemporary positionings of the South in rhetorics of American national identity. Particularly in the wake of the election of Barack Obama, the South has once again assumed a crucial, and crucially ambivalent, position in American self-fashionings to the nation and world, once again representing the cultural borders of both “backwardness” and “progress.” Analyzing a range of historic and contemporary texts—literary, political, and pop culture—I examine tensions in temporal positionings of the South for contemporary nation-building projects, and offer some speculations about how such positioning is guiding U.S. national and international policy.*

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