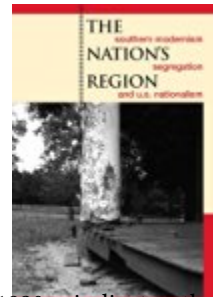


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Leigh Anne Duck. *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006. 340 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2810-2.

Reviewed by Kathryn Lee Seidel (Department of English, University of Central Florida)
Published on H-Florida (April, 2007)



Although the title of this book contains the word “segregation,” Leigh Anne Duck uses the word “apartheid” to describe the peculiar institution of racial segregation in the 1930s through the 1950s in the United States. She contrasts the South’s persistence in preserving regional cultural traditions with the civic ideal of nationalism. For Southerners, group membership is derived from ancestry, place, and culture; for the nation as a whole, citizens consist of those who share a “commitment to individual rights and capitalist progress” (p. 1). As Duck writes, “the idea of a distinct southern identity became popular among national elites as ballast for an increasingly conformist and progress-oriented nation”(p. 216). To explore this theme, Duck examines the work of Thomas Dixon, Jr., Erskine Caldwell, Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Mitchell, William Faulkner, and Ralph Ellison.

Southern exceptionalism and its “backwardness,” she posits, allowed the nation as a whole to claim enormous progress in promoting racial equality and economic gains. The selected writers explore and create a dialogue between tradition and modernism. They use “the southern grotesque, southern folklore, and southern gothic” (p. 12) as techniques to explore the effect on individuals of this divide between the South and the rest of the nation.

The book begins with a solid chapter on Reconstruction and the South’s delusions as they appear in plantation fiction, which is familiar material. Duck’s unique contribution to the discussion is noting that apartheid was supported and even promoted by the nation as a

whole. The next chapter, on the 1930s, indicates the Depression-era need to show economic progress for the individual, not the corporation; this led to renewed vigor for regionalism, which seemed “to provide a model for encouraging both connectedness and diversity”(p. 61). In this regard, Duck explores the film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and the novel *Gone With the Wind* (1936).

The work of Zora Neale Hurston appeared to critics such as Richard Wright to avoid the issues of racial segregation and the economics of the time, but Duck shows how Hurston’s work contrasts the private and personal choices of Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) with the public economic arena. Duck indicates that a text such as *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930) seems today to be the last gasp of the Agrarians but at the time it spoke for many Americans who saw materialism as a national crisis and longed for a return to a life based on art, connection, and nature.

Duck’s comment on Faulkner’s work similarly show that his rejection of linear time is placed in tension with the times themselves, and that modernization, progress, and equality are ubiquitous themes.

Readers interested in political history, as well as literature, will find the book to be revealing. Some of the material on each author is familiar to literary scholars. The overall thesis, that the nation as a whole found southern exceptionalism, backwardness, and even apartheid to be at times convenient and even alluring, is fresh and provocative.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida>

Citation: Kathryn Lee Seidel. Review of Duck, Leigh Anne, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13035>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.