



The South: What Is It? *Where Is It?*

John Shelton Reed

The South: What is this place? What's different about it? Is it different anymore? Good questions. Old ones, too. People have been asking them for decades. Some of us even make our living by asking them, but we still don't agree about the answers.

Let's look at what might seem to be a simpler question:

Where Is the South?

That's easy enough, isn't it? People more or less agree about which parts of the United States are in the South and which aren't. If I gave you a list of states and asked which are "Southern," all in all, chances are you'd agree with some of my students, whose answers are summarized in Figure 1. I don't share their hesitation about Arkansas, and I think too many were ready to put Missouri in the South, but there's not a lot to argue with here.

That tells us something. It tells us that the South is, to begin with, a shared idea that people can talk about, think about, and use to orient themselves and each other. People know whether they're in it or not. As a geographer would put it, the South is a "vernacular" region.

Stop and think about that. Why should that be? Why can I write "South" with some assurance that you'll know I mean Richmond and don't mean Phoenix? What is it that the South's boundaries enclose?

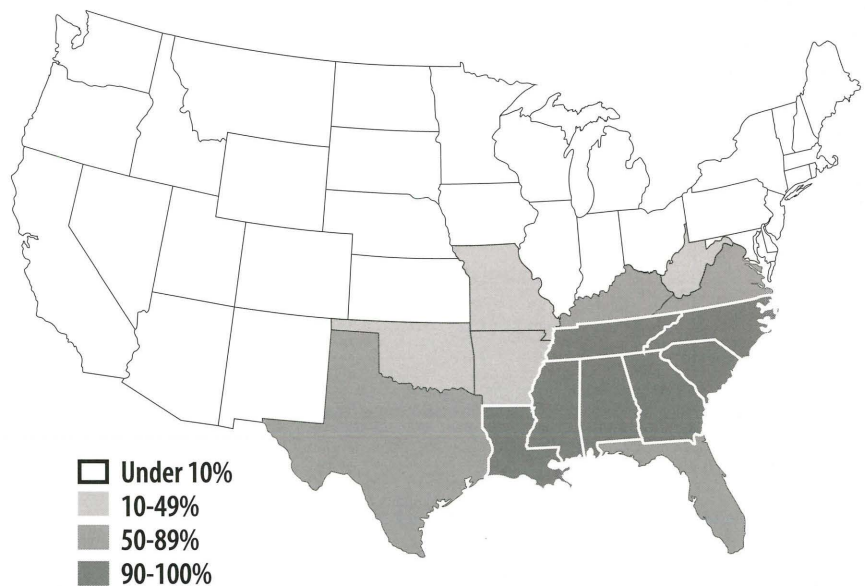
Well, for starters, it's not news that the South has been an economically and demographically distinctive place — a poor, rural region with a primarily biracial population, reflecting the historic dominance of the plantation system. The South's distinctive problems grow out of that history. Those problems may be less obvious now, but most are still with us to some extent, and we can still use them to locate the South.

But the South is more than just a collection of problems. It has also been home to pop-

ulations whose intertwined cultures set them off from other Americans as well as from each other. Some of us, in fact, have suggested that Southerners ought to be viewed as an American ethnic group. If distinctive cultural attributes identify Southerners, then we can say the South is where these attributes are found.

Southerners are also like ethnic groups in that they have a sense of group identity. One

Figure 1. Percentage Who Say Each State Is Southern



Source: 68 students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

of the best ways to define the South might be with what Hamilton Harden calls the "Hell, yes!" line: where people begin to answer that way when asked if they're Southerners.

Finally, regional institutions have contributed to the sense people have of the South's existence, distinctiveness, and boundaries. Many Southern businesses, Southern magazines, Southern voluntary associations, colleges, and universities serve the South as a



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whole. We can map the South by looking at where the influence of such enterprises extends.

All of these are plausible ways to go about finding out where the South is. For the most part, they provide similar answers, which is reassuring. Where they differ (as they sometimes do), they tell us something about what the South has been and what it is becoming.

Allow me a homely simile. The South is like my favorite pair of blue jeans. It's shrunk

some, faded a bit, got a few holes in it. It just might split at the seams. It doesn't look much like it used to, but it's more comfortable, and there's probably a lot of wear left in it.

The Socioeconomic South

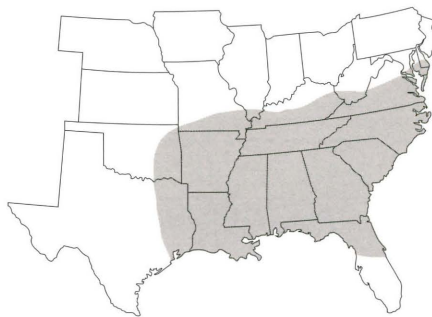
"Let us begin by discussing the weather," wrote U. B. Phillips in 1929. The weather, that distinguished Southern historian asserted, "has been the chief agency in making the South distinctive. It has fostered the cultivation of the staple crops. Which promoted the plantation system, which brought the importation of [African people], which not only gave rise to chattel slavery but created a lasting race problem. These led to controversy and regional rivalry for power, which ... culminated in a stroke for independence." Phillips and the many who have shared his views see almost everything of interest about the South as emanating from this complex of plantation, Black population, and the Civil War. Thus, ultimately, from the weather.

It's hot in the South during the summer, and humid. Some vegetable life loves that. Kudzu, for instance: that rampant, loopy vine needs long, moist summers, and gets them in the South. "Where kudzu grows" (Figure 2) isn't a bad definition of the South (and notice that it doesn't grow in southern Florida or west Texas).

But another plant has been far more consequential for the South. Dixie was "the land of cotton," and Figure 3 shows that in the early years of this century Southerners grew cotton nearly everywhere they could: any place with two hundred or more frost-free days, annual precipitation of twenty-three inches or more, and soil that wasn't sand.

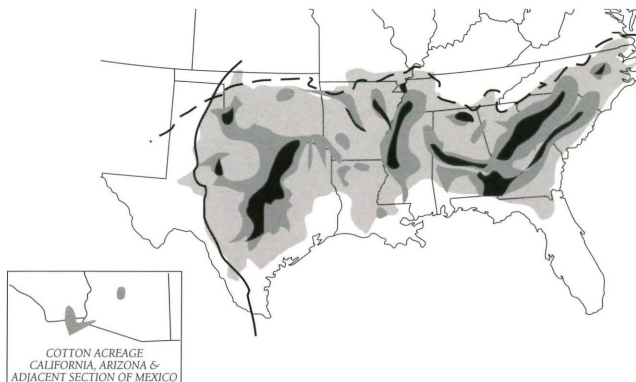
Certainly cotton culture affected the racial makeup of the South and slowed the growth of Southern cities. Figure 4 shows what the region looked like demographically in 1920. Few cities interrupted the countryside. A band of rural counties with substantial Black populations traces the area of cotton cultivation and ante-bellum plantation agriculture in a long arc from southeastern Virginia down and across to eastern Texas, with arms north and south along the Mississippi River.

Figure 2. Where Kudzu Grows



Source: John J. Winberry and David M. Jones, "Rise and Decline of the 'Miracle Vine': Kudzu in the Southern Landscape," *Southeastern Geographer* 13 (Nov. 1973): 62.

Figure 3. Acres of Cotton Cultivation, 1909



UNITED STATES, COTTON ACREAGE 1909

1,000 ACRES 10,000 ACRES 100,000 ACRES

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics.
Note: Map also shows gradients for precipitation and frost-free days.



This is the *Deep South*, what a geographer would call the “core area” of the region defined by its staple crop and economy. For decades the Deep South shaped Southern culture and politics and also shaped people’s image of what the South was all about.

Two out of three Southerners are now urban folk, and most rural Southerners work in industry. But the remains of this old South — concentrations of rural Southerners — can still be found (compare Figure 5 for 1980 to Figure 4). Most Southern states are still at the bottom of the U.S. per capita income distribution. Poverty is bad news, and I don’t suggest that we get nostalgic about it.

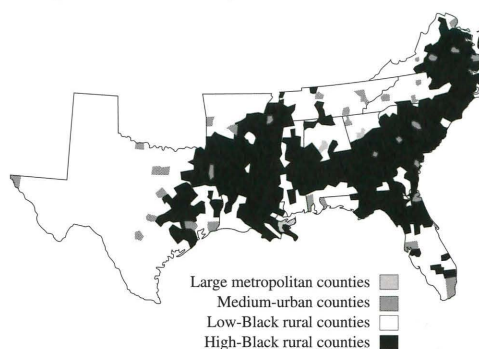
As the shadow of the plantation gives way to the light of the “Sunbelt,” the difference between the top and bottom of the socioeconomic heap is becoming smaller than it used to be. Consequently, those who view the South primarily in economic terms are likely to believe that the region is disappearing. “Southern characteristics” that once defined the South as a poor, rural region are more and more confined to pockets of poverty within the region; or, more accurately, the statistics reflect the increasing presence of air-conditioned pockets of affluence, particularly in Texas, Florida, and a few metropolitan areas elsewhere. If we map the South with the same criteria people used even fifty years ago, what we get these days looks more like Swiss cheese than a coherent region.

The Cultural South

But suppose we don’t define the South in economic terms. What if we somehow identify Southerners, and then define the South as where they come from? We could say, for example, that people who eat grits, listen to country music, follow stock car racing, support corporal punishment in schools, go to Baptist churches, and prefer bourbon to scotch (if they drink at all) are likely to be Southerners. It isn’t necessary that all or even most Southerners do these things, or that other people not do them. If Southerners just do them more often than other Americans, we can use them to locate the South.

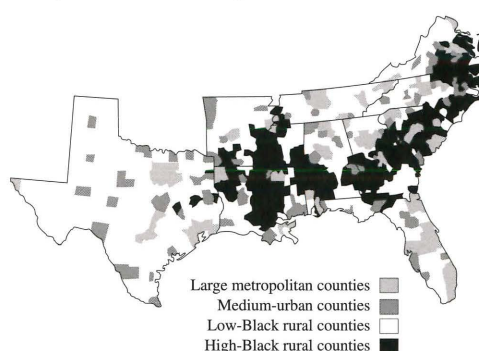
Look at the geographical distribution of

Figure 4. Rural South: Regional and Political in 1920



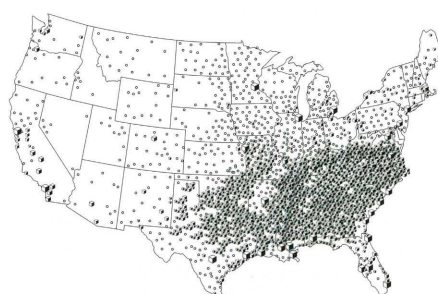
Source: Earl Black and Merle Black, *Politics and Society in the South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 36.

Figure 5. Urban South: Regional and Political in 1980



Source: Earl Black and Merle Black, *Politics and Society in the South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 38.

Figure 6. Members of Baptist Churches, 1952



Source: Wilbur Zelinsky, “An Approach to the Religious Geography of the United States: Patterns of Church Membership in 1952,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 51 (June 1961): 172.



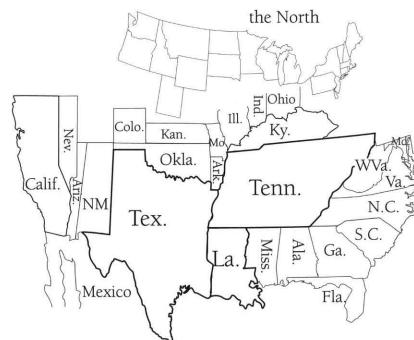
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Figure 7. Birthplaces of Country Music Notables, 1870-1960



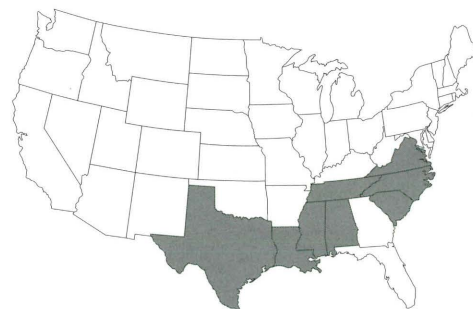
Source: George O. Carey, "T for Texas, T for Tennessee: The Origins of American Country Music Notables," *Journal of Geography* 78 (Nov. 1979): 221.

Figure 8. States Mentioned in Country Music Lyrics



Source: Ben Marsh, "A Rose-Colored Map," *Harper's*, July 1977, 80. Used by permission.
Note: The size of each state is proportional to the number of times it is mentioned.

Figure 9. No State Law against Sex Discrimination, 1972



Baptists, for example (Figure 6). Early on, members of that faith established their dominance in the South in numbers approached only by those of Methodists.

Figure 7 shows where the country music-makers come from: a fertile crescent extending from southwest Virginia through Kentucky and Tennessee to Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. Musically, what is sometimes called the "peripheral" South is in fact at the region's core. The Deep South is relatively peripheral to this country music scene. Country musicians' origins are reflected in the songs they produce, too: in Figure 8, the size of the states is proportional to the number of times they're mentioned in country music lyrics. Note Florida's role as a sort of cultural appendix to the South.

Regional cultural differences are also reflected in attitudes about family and gender roles. These differences have shaped the legal system: Southern states were slow to enact women's suffrage; most never did ratify the Equal Rights Amendment; until recently few had state laws against sex discrimination (Figure 9). Southern women have actually been more likely than other American women to work outside the home (they've needed the money more), but most often they've worked in "women's jobs" as textile operatives or domestic servants, for example.

These characteristics aren't related in any obvious way to the plantation way of life. Aspects of culture like diet, religion, sports, music, and family living patterns don't simply reflect how people once made their living, or how good a living they now make. To a great extent, they're just passed on from generation to generation within families. And when families move they usually carry these patterns with them.

That's why these values, tastes, and habits are found in the Appalachians and the Ozarks, and in most of Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Arizona. Mapping of this sort makes it easy to figure out who settled most of Missouri, too, as well as the southern parts of Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. And many of the same features can be found in scattered enclaves of Southern migrants all around the United States. The demise of the plantation



system didn't make these characteristics go away. So if we define the South as a patch of territory inhabited by people who are culturally different from other Americans, we still have a great deal to work with.

Indeed, we get new things to work with all the time. Country music blossomed only with the phonograph, and NASCAR only with the high-performance stock car. Consider also Figure 10, which locates colleges and universities that publish their own sports magazines. Southern institutions of higher learning seem to be out front on this one.

Southern Identification

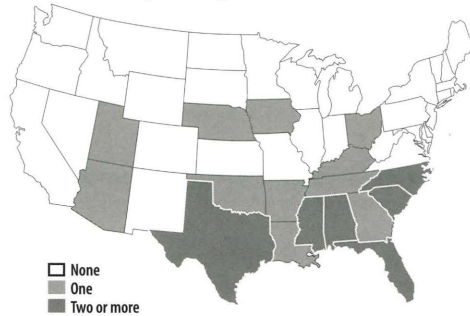
I suggested earlier that we can look at the South not just as a distinctive economic or cultural area, but as the home of people somehow bound together by ties of loyalty and identification. Clearly, the South has been a "province," in Josiah Royce's sense of that word: "part of a national domain which is, geographically and socially, sufficiently unified to have a true consciousness of its own unity, to feel a pride in its own ideals and customs, and to possess a sense of its distinction from other parts of the country."

Not long ago, the regional patriotism of most White Southerners was based on the shared historical experience of Confederate independence and defeat. There are still reminders of this past in the South's culture and social life. Figure 11, for example, shows chapters of the Kappa Alpha Order, a college fraternity with an explicitly Confederate heritage.

For many, the word *Dixie* evokes that same heritage, and Figure 12 shows where people are likely to include that word in the names of their business enterprises. Notice that the Appalachian South, which wasn't wild about *Dixie* in 1861, still isn't. The Southwest, too, has largely abandoned *Dixie*. Most of Florida would probably be gone as well if there was no *Dixie* Highway to keep the word in use. Even in the city of Atlanta, *Dixie* seems to be gone with the wind, or at least is on the way out. Only in what's left of the old plantation South is *Dixie* really alive and well.

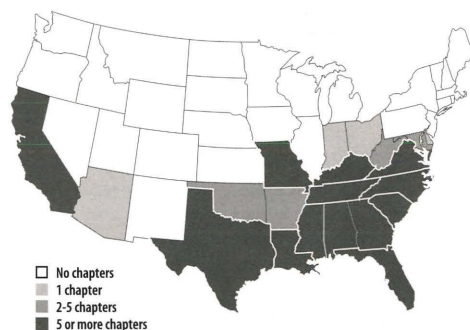
Obviously, as a basis for identification, sym-

Figure 10. Colleges and Universities That Publish Sports Magazines, 1982



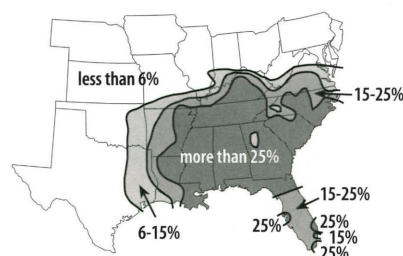
Source: Data from *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 15 Sept. 1982, 17.

Figure 11. Chapters of the Kappa Alpha Order, 1988



Source: Data from *Upsilon of Kappa Alpha*.

Figure 12. "Dixie" Listings as Percentage of "American" Listings in Telephone Directories, ca. 1975



Source: J. S. Reed, "The Heart of Dixie: An Essay in Folk Geography," *Social Forces* 54 (June 1976): 932.



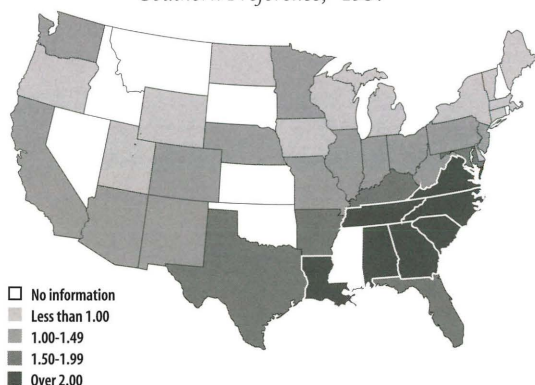
The American South

bols of the Confederate experience necessarily exclude nearly all Black Southerners, as well as many Appalachian Whites and recent migrants to the region. Fortunately, regional loyalty can be based on other things, among them the cultural differences we've already mentioned.

We can ask not only "where do people

practice Southern ways?" but also "where do people assert the superiority of Southern ways?" Figure 13, for example, shows where people are likely to say that they like Southern accents, prefer Southern food, and believe that Southern women are better looking than other women. (The Gallup Poll hasn't asked these questions lately, so the data are a little old, but I doubt that the patterns would be much different now.) The South defined in this way naturally coincides pretty well with the area where one encounters Southern accents, Southern food, and Southern women. It is a bigger region than the original Confederate South, just as the cultural South extends well beyond the domain of the old plantation system.

Figure 13. Average Scores on "Index of Southern Preference," 1957



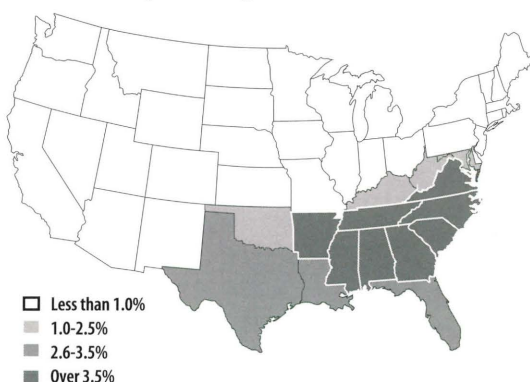
Source: J.S. Reed, *The Enduring South: Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), 18.
Note: One point each is awarded for liking a Southern accent, liking Southern cooking, and thinking Southern women are better looking than women from elsewhere in the United States.

Regional Institutions

Regional institutions play a part in sustaining the South, both the idea and the reality, tying the region together economically and socially and contributing to a sense of distinctiveness and solidarity. Like some American ethnic groups, Southerners have their own social and professional organizations, organs of communication, colleges and universities, and so forth. The Southern Historical Association, the Southern Railway, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Southern Growth Policies Board, and others create channels of communication and influence within the region, affirming its social reality. Organizations like these reinforce the idea that the South exists, has meaning, and is somehow a fact of nature.

Southern Living magazine, for instance, asserts month after month that there is such a thing as Southern living, that it is different and (by plain implication) better. Figure 14 shows where that message falls on fertile ground. Notice that Floridians are relatively uninterested in it. So are Texans, despite heroic efforts by the magazine (including a special Southwestern edition). In this we see plainly a development that regional sociologists were predicting fifty years ago, something that was only hinted at by maps of regional culture and regional identification: the bifurcation of the South into a "Southeast," centered in Atlanta, and a "Southwest," which is essentially greater

Figure 14. Southern Living Readers as Estimated Percentage of White Population, 1981



Source: Data from Marketing Department, *Southern Living*.



Texas (Texas has its own magazines), Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado.

We find something similar when we look at one of the South's regional universities. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has long been a center for the study and nurture of Southern culture. It has also helped to educate a regional elite. Figure 15 shows where an appreciable percentage of all college graduates are Chapel Hill alumni. Tar Heels are thick on the ground throughout the southeastern states, but (aside from some brain drain to the New York City suburbs) that's the only place they're so numerous. In particular, Chapel Hill graduates have little market penetration west of the Mississippi. (Texas has its own universities.)

So Where Is It?

So where is the South? Well, that depends on which South you're talking about. To be sure, some places are Southern by anybody's reckoning. But at the edges it's hard to say where the South is because people have different ideas about *what* it is.

The South is set apart by its people's distinctive ways of doing things. Mass culture has made some inroads, but Southerners still do many things differently. Some are even inventing new ways to do things differently. The persistence of this cultural South doesn't require that Southerners stay poor and rural. Indeed, poor folks can't afford some of its trappings: bass boats and four-wheel-drive vehicles, for instance.

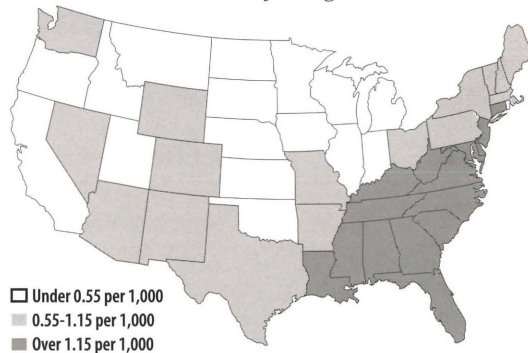
Because its history and its culture are somewhat different from the run of the American mill, the South also exists as an idea, which people can have feelings about. Many are fond of the South (some even love it); others view it with disdain. In either case, the South exists in people's heads and in their conversations. It will exist as long as people think and talk about it. And as for its actual boundaries, well, the South remains a place by virtue of its social system, more now than ever before perhaps. A network of institutions exists to serve it, and an ever-increasing number of people have a crass, pecuniary interest in making sure it continues to exist. But the brute facts of

cultural distance and diversity conspire to reduce the South to a southeastern core.

Given all these different Souths, obviously, we can't just draw a line on a map and call it the South's border. As Southerners are fond of saying: it depends. But, what the hell, if I had to do it, my candidate would be the line in Figure 16 that shows where "Southern" entries begin to be found in serious numbers in urban telephone directories (the one at 35 percent).

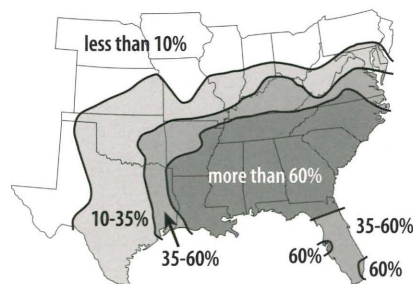
The South below that line makes a lot of sense. It includes the eleven former Confederate states, minus all of Texas but the eastern

Figure 15. Alumni of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as Estimated Proportion of All Residents with 1-4 Years of College, 1985



Source: Data from Alumni Office, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Figure 16. "Southern" Listings as Percentage of "American" Listings in Telephone Directories, ca. 1975



Source: J. S. Reed, "The Heart of Dixie: An Essay in Folk Geography," *Social Forces* 54 (June 1976): 929.



The American South

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edge. It also includes Kentucky, but not Missouri. A corner of Oklahoma makes it in as well: we get Muskogee.

Figure 16 shows variation within the South that also makes sense. By this measure, as by others we've examined, Kentucky and much of Virginia, East Texas and part of Arkansas, and most of peninsular Florida are less "Southern" than the regional heartland. On the other hand, a Southern sphere of influence takes in Maryland, West Virginia, Oklahoma, much of Texas, the District of Columbia, and the southern parts of the states from Ohio west to Missouri. Few would include these in the South proper, but fewer would deny their Southern cultural flavor.

This one statistic measures the presence of the sort of regional institutions I mentioned earlier, as well as the kind of regional enthusiasm that leads an entrepreneur to call a newsstand, say, the Southern Fruit and News. It shows, that is, where the idea of the South is vital, where its social reality extends to, or both.

In other words, if you want to know whether you're in the South, you could do worse than to check the phone book.

John Shelton Reed is the William Rand Keenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina. He is the author of many books about the South. He and his wife, Dale B. Reed, recently co-wrote 1001 Things Everyone Should Know About the South.

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