ESSAY

Enough About the Disappearing South

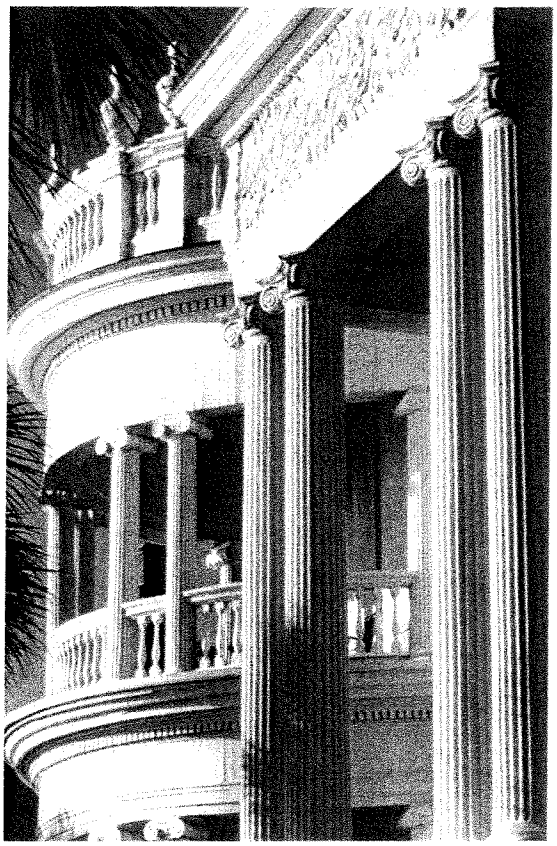
What About the Disappearing Southerner?

by Larry J. Griffin and Ashley B. Thompson

Profound transformations in the South since the 1960s have led many observers to sound the region's death knell. Distinctive and exceptional no longer, they say, the region has been disappearing, vanishing, shrinking, and converging with mainstream America for decades, a victim of relentless incorporation into mass society. In a brief but stark *Time* magazine essay published in 1990, Hodding Carter III, a former Mississippi newspaper editor transplanted to Washington, D.C., went even further, voicing the judgment that the South was dead: "The South as South, a living, ever regenerating mythic land of distinctive personality, is no more. At most it is an artifact lovingly preserved in the museums of culture and the shops of tourist commerce precisely because it is so hard to find in the vital centers of the region's daily life . . . the South is dead. . . . . What is lurching into existence in the South is purely and contemporaneously mainstream American, for better and for worse."[1]

Historian James Cobb reminds us, however, that epitaphs for the region are nothing new: Dixie's demise has been announced since at least the late nineteenth century. Still, those of us who came of age before the civil rights revolution, and those of us who study and teach the South, cannot help being astonished at how different the region is (and, for some, viscerally feels) since, say, 1960. This is not to say that the region is indistinguishable from America—if for no other reason, because its tragic, painful past continues uniquely to evoke commentary, reflection, and condemnation—or that it has solved all of its racial problems. But the South of the 1950s and 1960s—the Jim Crow, culturally insular, economically impoverished, politically retrograde South—*is* dead.[2] Epitaphs for *that* South are indeed in order.

But what, if anything, does all this imply about southern identity, about being a southerner? If the very thing that gives southern identity gravity and salience—a South distinct and genuinely set apart from the rest of the country—is itself disappearing, or, even, no more, are southerners as a group with a distinct, self-declared identity also disappearing, themselves a dying breed?



"The South as South, a living, ever regenerating mythic land of distinctive personality, is no more." Photograph courtesy of the Charleston Convention and Visitor's Bureau.

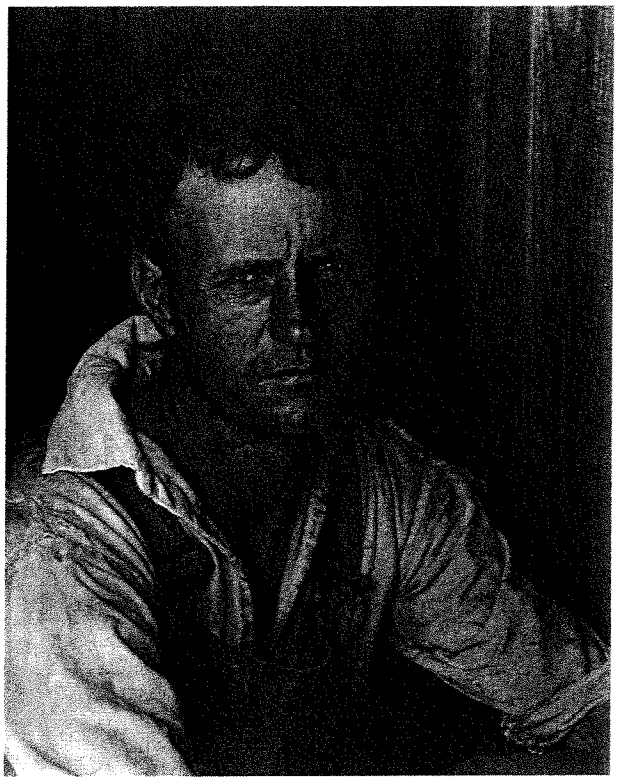
The answer to this question is not at all obvious. On the one hand, social identity expressed in terms of membership in a distinct group—identity of the sort signified by statements such as "Yes, I am a southerner"—no doubt best flourishes when the distinctive culture with which one identifies is, in Hodding Carter III's words, a "living" reality. On the other hand, identification with the South could, for some, mean little more than the happenstance of residence ("I live in the South, so of course I am a southerner") and thus be little affected by the presumed dissolution of a southern exceptionalism as much moral as cognitive. Of much greater cultural significance is that even in the absence of marked regional distinctiveness, some southerners may continue to identify with the region due to their self-proclaimed membership in what political scientist Benedict Anderson called, in a discussion of nationalism, an "imagined community," by which he means a "fraternity" of "comradeship" in which members "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." Southerners of this sort practice what we might call "symbolic southernness."[3] Largely ancestral, honorific, and selectively enacted rather than rooted in the routines of daily life or the attributions of nonsoutherners, "symbolic southernness" need not rest on an actually existing

The Jim Crow, culturally insular, economically impoverished, politically retrograde South—is dead. *Epitaphs for* that *South are indeed in order. Photograph courtesy of the North Carolina Collection in Wilson Library at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

distinctive South. Indeed, symbolic southerners are able to proclaim their heritage and differentiate themselves from the mass of Americans by grounding their sense of who they are in a mythic place existing mainly in cultural memory—the South as an imagined community—rather than in a "real" space. Southern exceptionalism may be waning, then, but what about southern identity?

The earliest polling data on southern identity comes from a 1971 survey of roughly eleven hundred North Carolinians conducted by sociologists John Shelton Reed and Glen Elder. Then, just at the tail end of the civil rights era, the great majority of respondents, roughly 80 percent (82 percent of whites, 73 percent of African Americans), affirmed their southernness when told "Some people here think of themselves as Southern, others do not" and then explicitly asked, "How about you—would you say you are a Southerner or not?" Though instructive and useful as a benchmark to gauge change over the last thirty years, this poll obviously is not representative of the South as a whole. Reliable information from geographically inclusive samples of southerners about their regional identity exists only since 1991, in a poll administered by the University of North Carolina (UNC), and from broadly representative samples of southerners only since 1992, when the UNC Southern Focus Poll was first fielded.[4]

Until 2000 the Focus Poll was administered twice yearly (in the fall and spring) by telephone to a randomly chosen, representative sample of roughly 700 to 1100 "geographic" southerners, defined by the Poll as inhabitants of the former Confederate states plus Kentucky and Oklahoma, and, until recently, 400 to 500 "nonsoutherners." The 2000 and 2001 polls were administered once, in the spring of each year. The target populations were U.S. adults eighteen years of age or older, residing in houses with telephones. Geographic southerners were always



Are southerners themselves a dying breed? Photograph reproduced from the Collections of the Library of Congress.

over-sampled (relative to their proportions in the nation's population) to insure a large statistical representation in the survey, and the Poll occasionally over-sampled African Americans for the same reason. In the trend analysis reported below, we look only at geographic southerners and combine the fall and spring surveys for years 1992–1999 to smooth away minor intra-year fluctuations.[5] Altogether, about 17,600 geographic southerners were studied in the nineteen polls fielded since 1991.

Each of these polls asked an identically worded question about southern identity phrased quite similarly to the one used by Reed and Elder in their 1971 survey of North Carolinians, "Do you consider yourself to be a Southerner, or not?" Our measure of regional identity should be understood as a gauge of identification *as* a southerner and not necessarily as an indicator of identification *with* other southerners. The former involves categorizing oneself as a member of a regional group, itself understood by Reed as "a reference group, a cognitive entity that people use to orient themselves." The latter, on the other hand, expresses affect, warmth, and empathy toward one's regional group.[6] Responses to the "Do you consider yourself" question, then, are the basis for the comparison to the 1971 survey and for the trend analysis of geographic southerners' identification as regional group members over the period 1991 to 2001.

Table 1. Trends in Identification with the South* among Respondents Residing in the South, 1991–2001

	Estimated Decline from Trend Analysis	N in Sample
Overall (Since 1991)	–7.4%	17,186
Gender (since 1991)		
Female	–6.2%	9999
Male	–9.2%	7183
Race/Ethnicity (since 1991)		
Black	–4.4%	2781
White	–5.5%	12,550
Asian American, Native American (since 1992)	–9.5%	522
Hispanic only	–19.0%	959
Age (since 1991)		
17–34	–8.9%	5445
35–54	–6.4%	6998
55+	–8.9%	4646
Residence (since 1991)		
City/Suburban	–6.5%	8956
Town/Rural	–8.1%	8165
Appalachia	–6.3%	1211
Lowland	–7.0%	14,127
Deep South (AL, GA, LA, MS, SC)	–4.4%	5339
Peripheral South (AR, FL, KY, NC, OK, TN, TX, VA)	–8.3%	11,846
Years Lived in South (since 1992)		
Less than 10	–4.5%	1836
More than 10 but less than entire life	–5.3%	3717
Entire life	–2.1%	10,232
Education (since 1991)		
Less than high school	–5.5%	2035
High school	–9.6%	5155
Some college	–6.1%	4624
College and above	–3.9%	5290

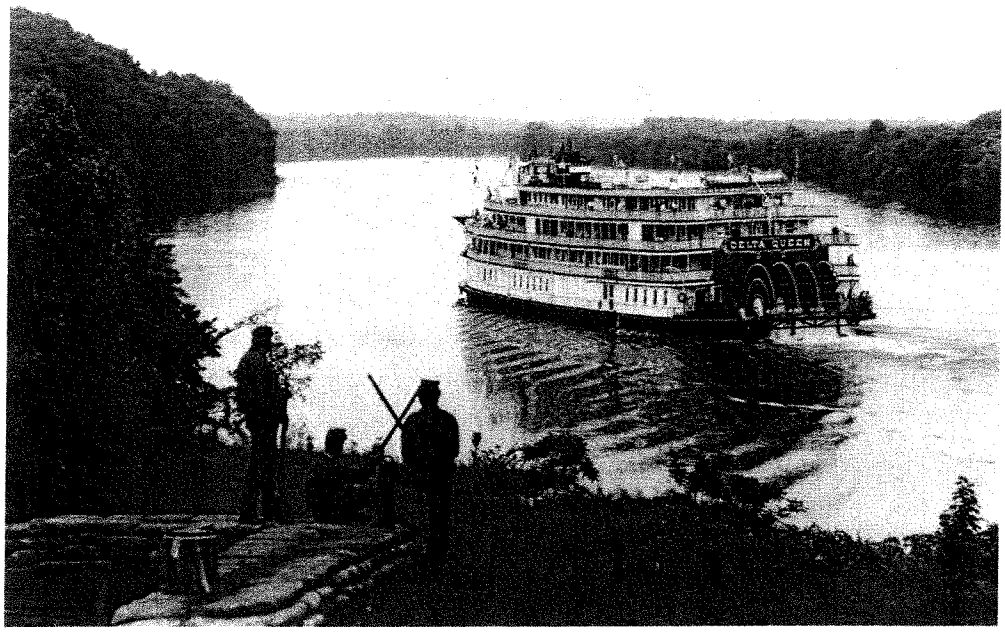
Table 1. (continued)

	Estimated Decline from Trend Analysis	N in Sample
Marital Status (since 1991)		
Married	–4.0%	9044
Divorced, single, widowed	–8.6%	6959
Employment Status (since 1992)		
Employed	–6.5%	10,403
Unemployed/retired, etc.	–3.6%	4781
In school	–12.4%	837
Religion (since 1992)		
Baptist/Methodist	–1.7%	7811
Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian	–1.5%	1450
Other protestant	–15.3%	2092
Catholic	–12.9%	2299
Other religion	–21.8%	1301
No religion	–1.5%	894
Income (since 1992)		
Less than 20K	–7.0%	3208
20–29.9K	–9.8%	2438
30–39.9K	–2.1%	2237
40–49.9K	–2.2%	1573
50–59.9K	–7.5%	1177
60K+	–0.8%	2765
Political Stance/Affiliation (since 1992)		
Conservative	–0.4%	5799
Moderate	–5.3%	4941
Liberal	–7.8%	3008
No preference	–18.9%	734
Democrat	–8.9%	5601
Republican	–0.1%	5183
Independent	–7.2%	3500

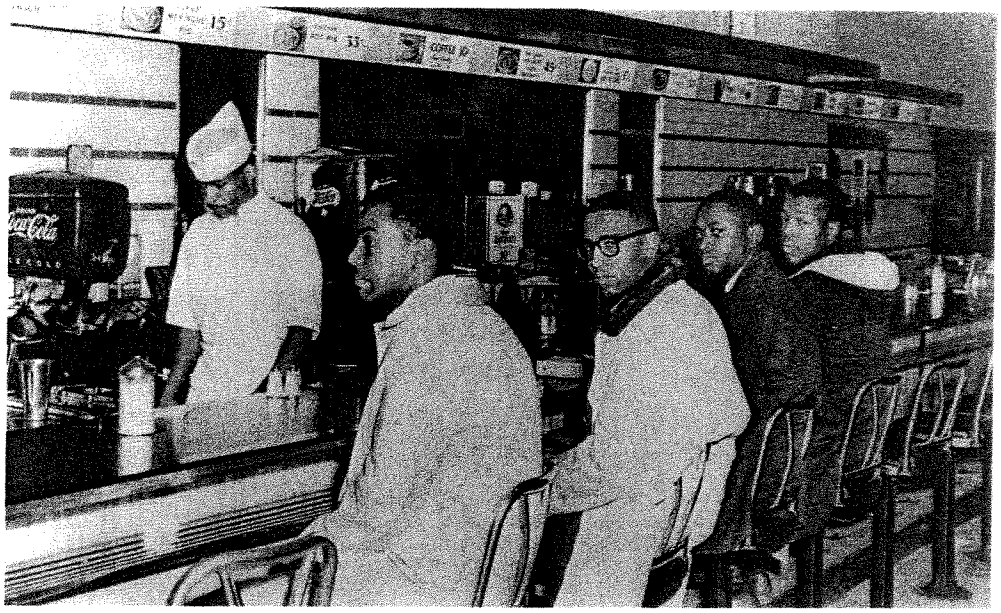
* Eleven former Confederate states plus Kentucky and Oklahoma.

Just about the time Hodding Carter III issued his highly visible salvo in *Time*, 82 percent of the 233 North Carolinians interviewed in the 1991 and 1992 Southern Focus Polls said they were southern. This is a bit higher than the percentage identifying with the region in the 1971 survey of the state. To the extent that North Carolinians broadly typify at least a segment of the upper or peripheral South, then, "southernness" as a self-declared identity had not declined at all, and possibly had risen, in the two decades of very real regional change since the Reed-Elder survey. What, though, of more recent, and more geographically dispersed, patterns? Has there been any detectable trend upward or downward since 1991 in the percentage of southerners who identify as "southerners?"

The Southern Focus Polls indicate that though considerable variability in southern identity exists from year to year, most residents of the region, 70 percent or more, continued throughout the 1990s and into the new century to identify as southern. (See figure 1. Keep in mind that for each of these figures the vertical axis represents the percentage of southern respondents, and the horizontal axis designates the year of the poll.) There is no question, then, of the extinction of self-declared southerners as a group, whatever the reality (or lack thereof) of vanishing southern distinctiveness. Moreover, to the extent that the existence of the South—at least as an imagined community—depends on the willingness of its residents to identify with the region, rather than their identity being a conse-



"Symbolic southerners" differentiate themselves from the mass of Americans by grounding their identity in a mythic place existing mainly in cultural memory. Photograph courtesy of Tennessee Tourist Development.



At the tail end of the Civil Rights era, the majority of southerners—roughly 80 percent—affirmed their southernness when told "Some people here think of themselves as Southern, others do not" and then asked, "How about you—would you say you are a Southerner or not?" Four African American student Civil Rights activists "sitting in" at the Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, courtesy of Greensboro News-Record *Library.*

quence of regional distinctiveness, as John Shelton Reed and others have argued, the region itself remains alive and well. That said, the poll data also indicate that identification as a southerner has clearly suffered a modest decline since 1991: according to the polls, southern identity has fallen, on average, about 0.7 of a percentage point per year since 1991, from a high percentage in the upper 70s eleven years ago to a (predicted) low hovering at 70 percent in 2001.[7]

Eleven years, admittedly, are not sufficient to establish an actual trend in regional identity. But there are several clues in the Focus Polls suggesting that the decrease since 1991 is not ephemeral. First is the near universality of the trend among southerners who are otherwise quite diverse: even those who, in the recent past, have been the most likely to identify as southern are now less likely to do so. Second is the static or, in some cases, declining traditional demographic base of "southernness" itself.

The decline in identification with the South is seen, usually fairly strongly, for both women and men (see figures 2 and 3) and for all races, ethnicities—especially Hispanics—(see figures 4, 5, and 6) and age groups (see figure 7, 8, and 9): Hispanic, black and white, male and female, young and old—all discernibly identify with the region less in 2001 than 1991. The decline is seen, too, for both urban and rural dwellers, for those living in the southern mountains and in the

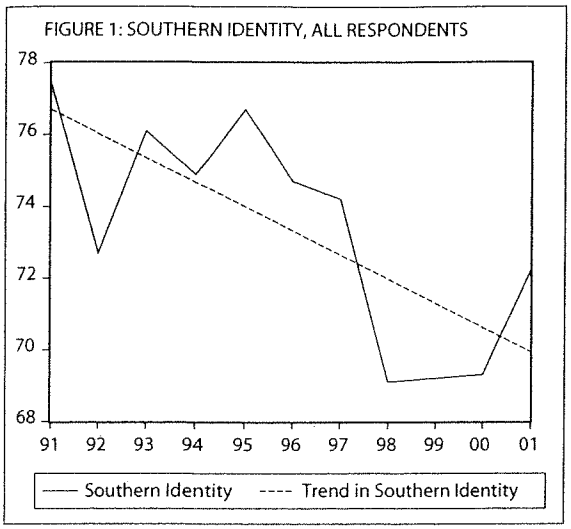


FIGURE 1: SOUTHERN IDENTITY, ALL RESPONDENTS
78
76
74
72
70
68
91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 00 01
Southern Identity
Trend in Southern Identity

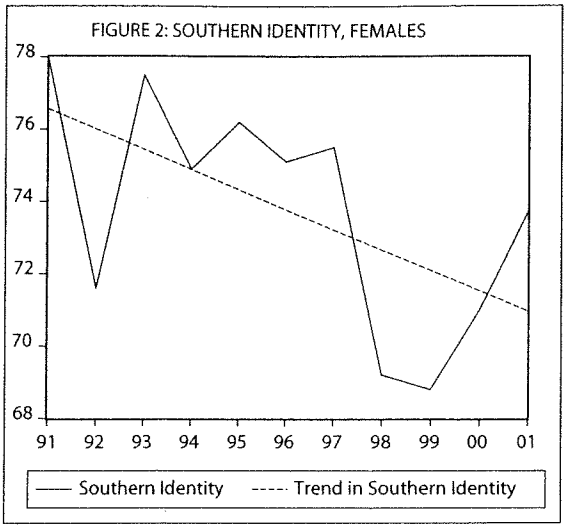


FIGURE 2: SOUTHERN IDENTITY, FEMALES
78
76
74
72
70
68
91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 00 01
Southern Identity
Trend in Southern Identity

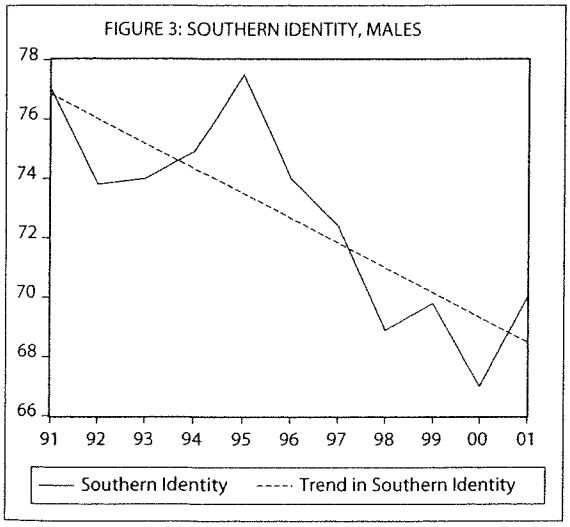


FIGURE 3: SOUTHERN IDENTITY, MALES
78
76
74
72
70
68
66
91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 00 01
Southern Identity
Trend in Southern Identity

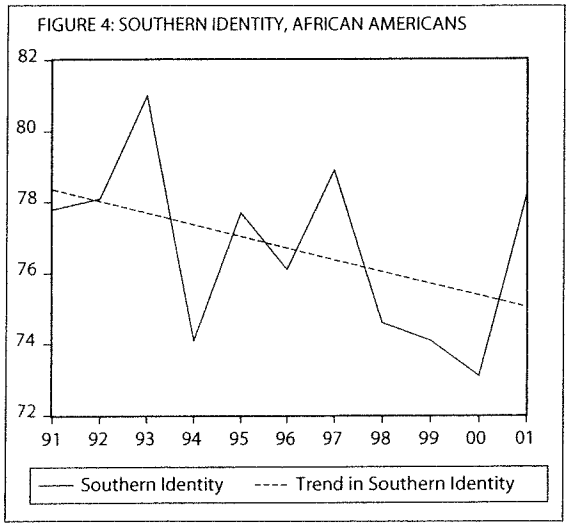


FIGURE 4: SOUTHERN IDENTITY, AFRICAN AMERICANS
82
80
78
76
74
72
91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 00 01
Southern Identity
Trend in Southern Identity

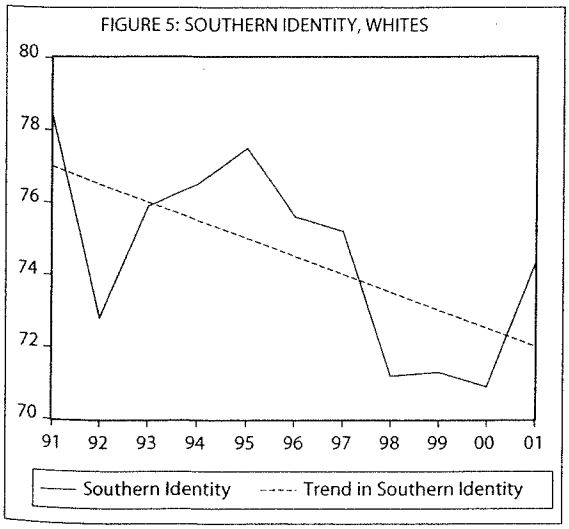


FIGURE 5: SOUTHERN IDENTITY, WHITES
80
78
76
74
72
70
91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 00 01
Southern Identity
Trend in Southern Identity

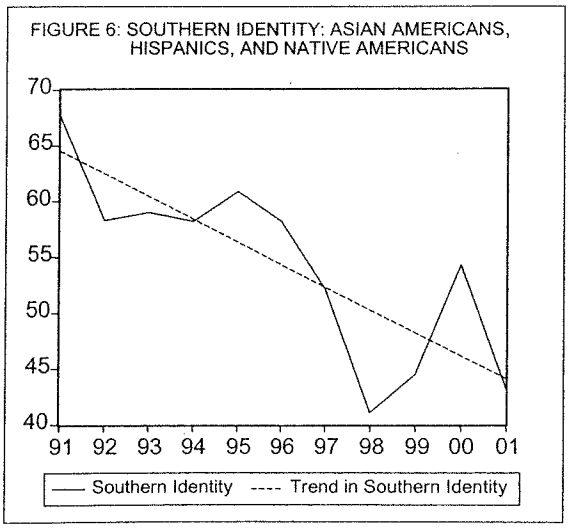
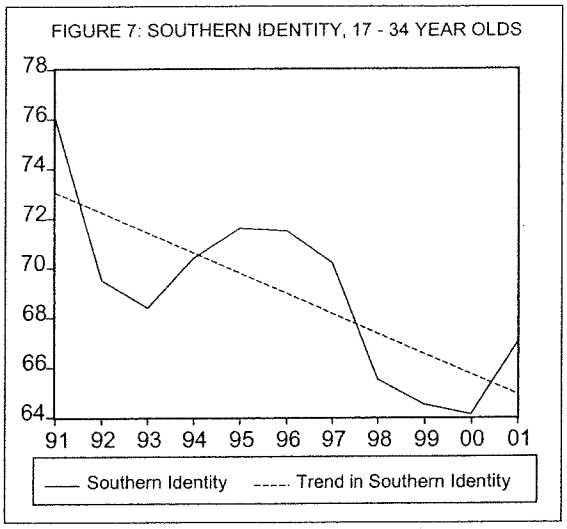
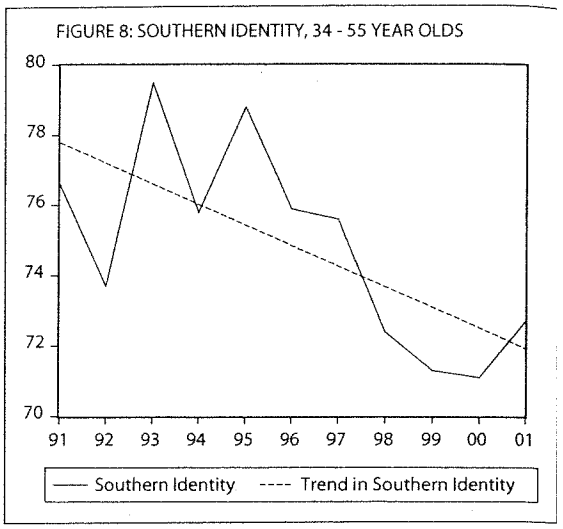
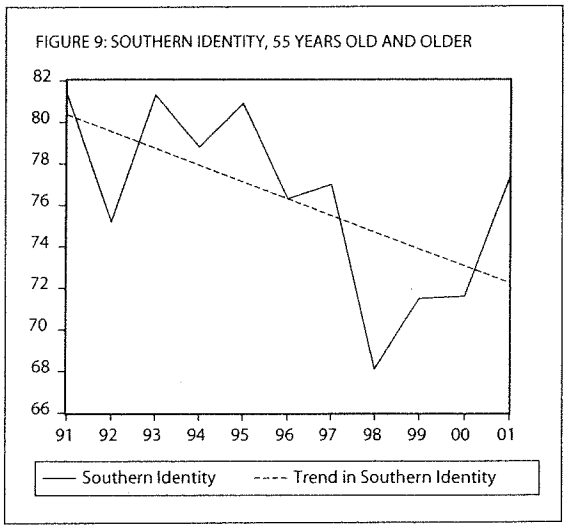


FIGURE 6: SOUTHERN IDENTITY: ASIAN AMERICANS, HISPANICS, AND NATIVE AMERICANS
70
65
60
55
50
45
40
91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 00 01
Southern Identity
Trend in Southern Identity

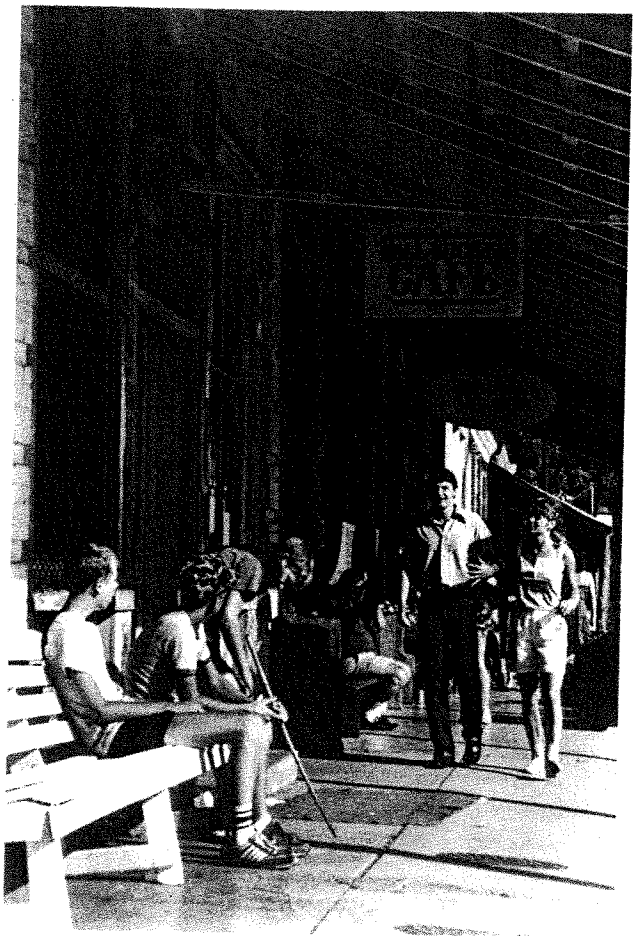






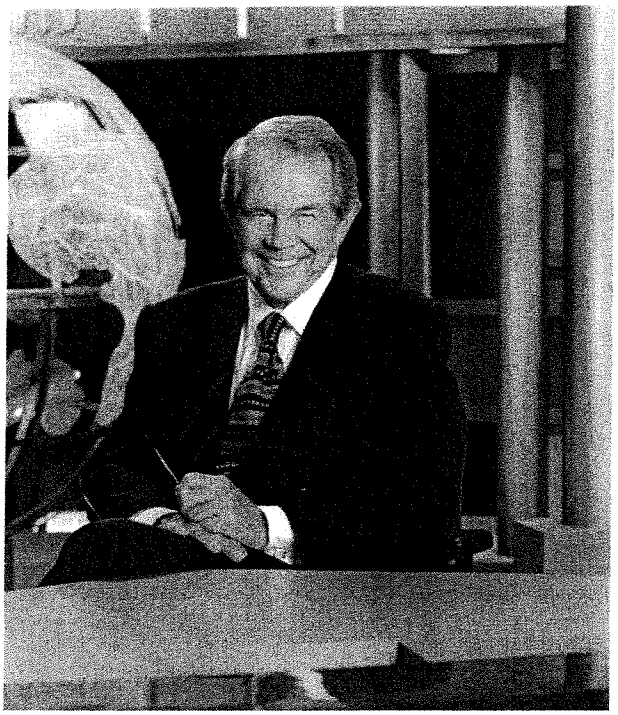
lowlands, and for those in the deep as well as the peripheral South. It is observed for all education levels, all marital and employment groups, and most religious groups, income categories, and political affinities. Table 1 presents the estimated trend in regional identity for forty-six groups broken down by race, gender, age, education, and the like. The contraction of southern identity during the decade of the 1990s was minimal for mainline Protestants, obviously a huge group of southerners, and for the unchurched, but only the region's Republicans, political conservatives, and most affluent escaped the decline entirely. No category of geographic southerners among the forty-six groups increased their identification with the region during the period of the Southern Focus Poll. If variable across social groups in the region and not generally severe for most of them, the decline in southern identity nonetheless is quite pervasive.

The second reason that the downward movement in southern identity over the



Altogether, about 17,600 geographic southerners have been studied in the nineteen polls fielded since 1991. Each of these polls asked an identically worded question about southern identity phrased quite similarly to the one used by Reed and Elder in their 1971 survey: "Do you consider yourself to be a Southerner, or not?" Photograph courtesy of Tennessee Tourist Development.

last eleven years is not ephemeral is that the groups that have traditionally exhibited the highest degree of southernness are themselves somewhat less prevalent in the region's population as the convergence of region and nation continues. As a proportion of the South's population, lifelong southerners, rural southerners in the Deep South, and religious fundamentalists and Baptists (groups with a particular affinity for the South) are giving way, modestly but seemingly inexorably, to folks who are much less inclined to identify with the South. For example, three-fourths of Hispanics identified with the region in 1991–92; by 2000–01, only a bit more than half did. During this period, moreover, they increased their representation in the Southern Focus Polls by about 50 percent, from about 5 percent to more than 8 percent.[8] Likewise, southerners with religious identities other than mainline Protestant—those without traditional denominational anchoring and, to a lesser degree, Catholics—are proportionately more numerous in the region, up from approximately 33 percent in 1992–93 to more than 40 percent by the turn of the century. They are also shedding their southern identity at the rate of almost a percentage point a year: since 1992 the percentage identifying

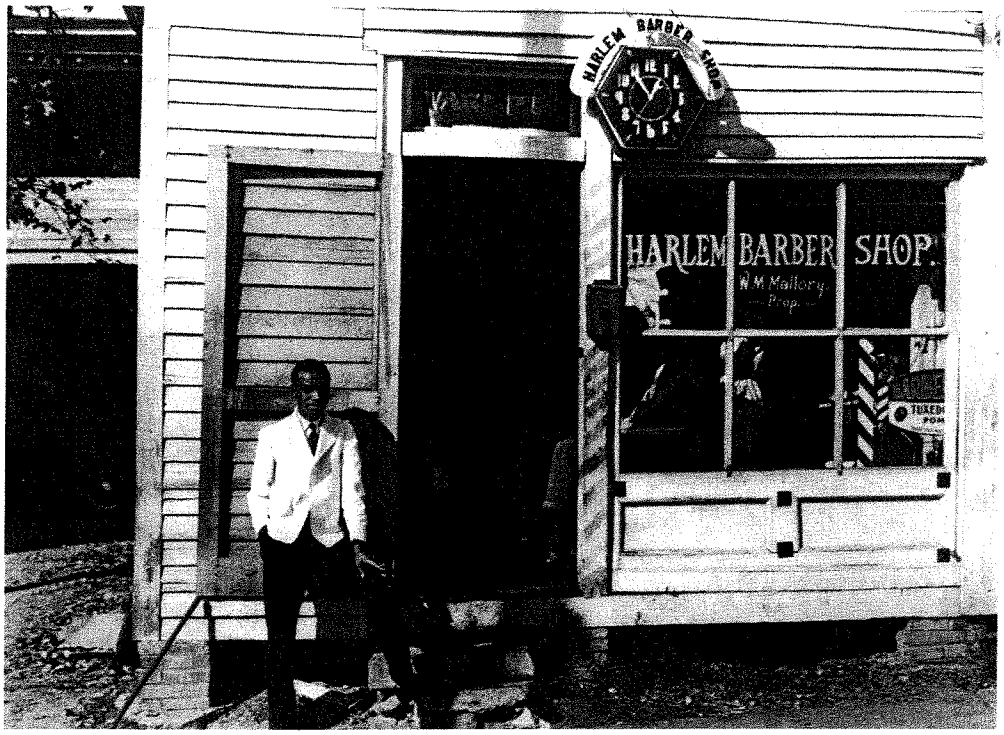


The contraction of southern identity during the 1990s was minimal for mainline Protestants, obviously a huge group of southerners, and the unchurched. Only the region's Republicans, political conservatives, and most affluent escaped the decline entirely. Photograph courtesy of the Christian Broadcasting Network.

with the region has fallen from 65 to 58 percent. These and similar cultural shifts—and there are many—clearly do not augur well for the maintenance of southern identity at the high levels observed in the recent past.

Admittedly, these patterns should not be overstated. Too little over-time data exist here or elsewhere to gauge with certainty trends in regional identification. But with the Southern Focus Poll currently on hiatus, these eleven years of data may offer the only opportunity to study southern identity systematically over time with large numbers of randomly sampled, geographically diverse southerners.

These patterns also should not be projected without qualification into the future: what appears to be a trend today can be reversed tomorrow. As newcomers to the South, such as Hispanics, experience southern culture over a sustained period, for example, they may increasingly think of themselves as southern. By far the single strongest correlate of southern identity in these data, and one often overriding potentially competing racial, ethnic, and religious identities, is how long individuals have lived in the South. The downward trend for lifelong white southerners—most of whom do not have ready access to competing ethnic or racial identities, for example—was only about .5 percent during the eleven years of the poll. But what we see from the remaining poll data is not so encouraging. *All* lifelong southerners, black and white—more than 90 percent of whom have declared their southern identity in every poll—have reduced their identification rates by 2 percent since 1991. Among Hispanics who had lived in the region all their life, 81 percent identified as southern from 1991 to 1993, compared to less



Self-defined southerners are not a dying breed. They have not "vanished," and they have not been displaced by so-called cosmopolitans. But, proportionately, there are visibly fewer of them today than just a decade or so ago. Photograph courtesy of the Odum Photo Study in the Southern Historical Collection at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

than 74 percent in 1999 though 2001. The decline for lifelong southern Asian Americans, especially, and Native Americans was as precipitous: considered as a group, their rates of regional self-categorization fell from 88 percent in 1992–93 to 81 percent in 1999–2001.

It is not easy to imagine a circumstance that would dramatically reverse the patterns seen in these data. Pockets of the rural lowland and mountain South aside, the region is likely to continue to converge with nation: the South of tomorrow will be more urban, home to more newcomers, and display greater religious and ethnic diversity. Southern identity is apt to suffer as a consequence. In a post-"9/11" America, finally, regional identity of any sort—including identification with the South—may for an extended period take a backseat to a resurgence of national consciousness and identity. Self-defined southerners are not a dying breed; they have not "vanished," and they have not been displaced by so-called cosmopolitans. But, proportionately, there are visibly fewer of them today than just a decade or so ago for two reasons. First, southern identity's core constituencies have shrunk, and, second, for now at least, most groups of southerners—including some of those usually most closely identified with the South—have

cooled somewhat in their enthusiasm for the label "southern." The region apparently no longer mobilizes the identities of its citizens as strongly as it did just a decade or so ago. Why exactly this has happened and whether this should be met with chagrin or relief are questions for future analysis.

Read More About It

Harry S. Ashmore, *An Epitaph for Dixie* (Norton, 1958).

John B. Boles, "The New Southern History," *Mississippi Quarterly* (Fall, 1992): 369–83.

Leslie W. Dunbar, "The Final New South?," *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Winter, 1998): 49–58.

John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: the Southernization of America* (Harper's Magazine Press, 1974).

David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

Selz C. Mayo, "Social Change, Social Movements and Disappearing Sectional South," *Social Forces* (October, 1964): 1–10

John C. McKinney and Linda Brookover Bourque, "The Changing South: National Incorporation of a Region," *American Sociological Review* (June, 1971): 399–412.

Howard L. Preston, "Will Dixie Disappear? Cultural Contours of a Region in Transition," *The Future South* (University of Illinois Press, 1991), 188–216.

John Shelton Reed, "The Banner That Won't Stay Furled," *Southern Cultures* (Spring, 2002): 76–99.

———, "The South's Mid-Life Crisis," and "New South or No South? Southern Culture in 2036," in John Shelton Reed, *My Tears Spoiled My Aim and Other Reflections on Southern Culture* (Harcourt Brace, 1993).

———, James M. Kohls, and Carol Hanchette, "The Shrinking South and the Dissolution of Dixie," *Social Forces* (September, 1990): 221–33.

Leonard Reissman, "Social Development and the American South," *Journal of Social Issues* (January, 1966): 101–16.

Charles P. Roland, "The Ever-Vanishing South," *Journal of Southern History* (February, 1982): 3–20.

NOTES

We would like to thank Peggy Thoits and John Willis for their comments on this paper.

1. Hodding Carter III, "The End of the South," *Time*, 6 August 1990, 82.

2. James C. Cobb, "An Epitaph for the North: Reflections on the Politics of Regional and National identity at the Millennium," *Journal of Southern History* (February, 2000): 3–24; Larry J. Griffin, "Southern Distinctiveness, Yet Again: Or, Why America Still Needs the South," *Southern Cultures* 6 (Fall 2000): 51–76.

3. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso, 1991), 6–7. Our notion of "symbolic southernness" is heavily indebted to the sociologist Herbert J. Gans, who developed the intriguing notion of "symbolic ethnicity" to account for the upsurge of ethnic identity among largely assimilated second- and third-generation (nonsouthern) white ethnics. See Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2.1: 1–20.

4. John Shelton Reed, *Southerners: The Social Psychology of Sectionalism* (University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 12. The Southern Focus Poll was conducted by the UNC Odum Institute for Research in Social Science and sponsored by the Atlanta *Journal-Constitution* and the UNC Center for the Study of the American South. Polling data can be accessed online at http://www2.irss.unc.edu/irss/pollstories/sfpollindex.asp, 9 April 2003. The 1991 poll, also administered by UNC, appears to be a precursor to the Focus Polls.

5. The 1991 poll sampled southerners only and excluded Oklahoma; though not strictly comparable to the Focus Polls, its biases, especially when appropriately weighted, appear to be small.

6. See the distinction Reed (*Southerners*, 11, 56) draws between these two forms of identification. The Southern Focus Polls asked respondents about identification with other southerners too infrequently to permit assessment of trend. For analysis linking identification *as* a southerner with identification *with* others in the region in the polls, see Larry J. Griffin and Peggy A. Thoits, "Region as Social Identity: Do You Consider Yourself a Southerner?" (unpublished, 2003).

7. "From that point of view, the question is, in the first place, less geographical than social-psychological; it is less that southerners are people who come from the South, for instance, than that the South is where Southerners come from." John Shelton Reed, *One South: An Ethnic Approach to Regional Culture* (University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 13.

This trend line is derived from a statistical procedure called regression analysis. Procedures to detect trends which use all data points to calculate the extent of change, such as regression analysis, generate more reliable results than do simple comparisons of beginning and ending scores, which, given the entire history of the series, may be unusually high or low due merely to the idiosyncrasies of a particular sample (e.g., over-sampling of a particular group).

Separate trend analyses were conducted for each of the thirteen states surveyed in the Southern Focus Polls: only Arkansans increased their regional identification over the eleven years of the poll, and that gain was quite modest (about 2 percent). Trends for the remaining twelve states were all negative, with Texans and North Carolinians leading the psychological withdrawal from the region (11 to 12 percent decline). The trends in the table and graphs were calculated by using as the base only those respondents who answered the identity question "yes" or "no," but analysis including "don't know" responses and refusals produced nearly identical results.

8. See also the Associated Press release of 4 September 2002, "Census: South Sees Fastest U.S. Hispanic Population Growth." The AP story, based on a Census report, noted that since 1994 the Hispanic population has grown almost 24 percent in the (Census-defined) South, compared to 19 percent for the country as a whole. Hispanics in the region are concentrated in Florida and Texas, but Arkansas, Georgia, and North Carolina comprise three of the four states in the nation with the steepest Hispanic growth rates.