Southern Journal

Reflections on the South

Enough About the Disappearing South—What About the Disappearing Southerner?

by Larry J. Griffin and Ashley B. Thompson

Most scholarly articles are read by a handful of specialists and, too often, are quickly forgotten. We fully expected a similar fate for the "Disappearing Southerner?" article we published in the Fall 2003 issue of *Southern Cultures*. Were we surprised! Scores of newspapers from Seattle to Cleveland, Miss., have printed or posted the original Associated Press release, and journalists from another dozen or more have written original stories about the article and its findings. CNN discussed it on one of its news programs, and we have been interviewed by NPR and the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, among other radio programs. Interest in the piece and the topic we discuss seems even to have international appeal, as the Voice of America interviewed us for a story broadcast overseas.

Why? What is it about the South, the disappearing South and the disappearing Southerner that attracts such interest, not only in the region but also from without? We've no hard evidence here, but we suspect that the reason lies in what the South historically has meant to America: a region apart, but also one tantalizingly near. The South was for so long America's opposite, but, paradoxically, also irreducibly American. It is this paradoxical identity, we think, that continues to fascinate and draw, still, the eyes and ears of America down south. All of which, of course, begs the question of what the South is, *really* is.

Now, to that matter: For those inside the region—perhaps especially those claiming to be Southerners—the South likely represents a homeland, a place of nostalgic remembrance of the past, a place characterized by special ways of cooking, speaking, maybe even a way of thinking and behaving—slower paced, more conservative and traditional—that differs from that of the rest of the nation. Outside the region, the same notions of "Southernness" may ring true, though spiced with perceptions that are distinctly less favorable: racist, backwards, a scar or blight on the image of America.

So, what is the South? The South can be plantation, sharecropping Mississippi, or it can be gambling, showboat Mississippi; it can be small mill towns in the Carolinas, hill towns in Georgia, coal towns in Kentucky. And it also can be, and is, Atlanta and Charlotte, Nashville and Houston, and the Research Triangle Park. It can be, and is, UVA, William and Mary, and Sewanee, and it can be, and is, Fisk, Alcorn A&M and Tuskegee. Southerners can be, and were and are, communists and Christians (sometimes simultaneously), city folk and country bumpkins, traditionalists and modernizers. They can be and were named Jesse Daniel Ames, a suffragette and anti-lynching advocate, and Rebecca Felton, a suffragette and proponent of lynching; they have been named Myles Horton, an authentic white radical from the Tennessee mountains, and James Vardaman, an authentic white demagogue from the Mississippi delta. Southerners have been named Muhammad Ali and Jesse Helms, Martin Luther King and Huey Long, Anne Moody and Willie Morris.

So there is not, and never was, one South; there are, and always have been, many Souths, rural and urban, cosmopolitan and provincial, moral and immoral, radical and reactionary, rich and poor, brown and red, yellow and black and white. And they are all ours.

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

continued on page 86

Southern Journal *continued from page 88*
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. … [T]he South is dead. … What is lurching into existence in the South is purely and contemporaneously mainstream American, for better and for worse."

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 19th 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 its racial problems. But the South of the 1950s and 1960s—the Jim Crow, culturally insular, economically impoverished, politically retrograde South—*is* dead. 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, are Southerners as a group with a distinct, self-declared identity also disappearing, themselves a dying breed?

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." Largely ancestral, honorific and selectively enacted rather than rooted in the routines of daily life or the attributions of non-Southerners, "symbolic Southernness" need not rest on an actually existing 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?

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. Until 2000 the Focus Poll was administered twice yearly by telephone to a randomly chosen, representative sample of roughly 700 to 1,100 "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 yearly. Altogether, about 17,600 geographic Southerners were studied in the 19 polls fielded since 1991.

> The decline in identification with the South is seen for both women and men and for all races, ethnicities and age groups. It is observed for all education levels, all marital and employment groups, and most religious groups, income categories and political affinities.

Each of these polls asked an identically worded question about Southern identity: "Do you consider yourself to be a Southerner, or not?" The Southern Focus Polls indicate that although 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.

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 consequence of regional distinctiveness, as sociologist 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 seven-tenths of a percentage point per year since 1991, from a high percentage in the

upper 70s just 11 years ago to a (predicted) low hovering at 70 percent in 2001.

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 and for all races, ethnicities—especially Hispanics—and age groups: 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 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.

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 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 the downward movement in Southern identity over the last 11 years is not ephemeral is that the groups who 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.

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 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 11 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 one-half percent during the 11 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 lives, 81 percent identified as Southern from 1991 to 1993, compared to less 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 to be answered. V

This article was adapted from an essay that first appeared in the Fall 2003 issue of Southern Cultures. *A number of charts from the original article detailing trends reflected in the Southern Focus Polls, as well as the authors' notes and suggested reading, may be found at* Vanderbilt Magazine*'s Web site: http://www.vanderbilt.edu/alumni/publications/index.html.*