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NORTH AMERICA'S VERNACULAR REGIONS

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ABSTRACT. The vernacular, or popular, region, "the product of the spatial perception of average people," is a phenomenon that remains too poorly known in North America. It promises to gain importance as the general level of public and scholarly interest in regional, ethnic, and historical questions continues to rise. The larger, subnational North American vernacular regions are studied through an analysis of the frequency of selected regional and locational terms in the names of enterprises (both profit and nonprofit) listed in recent telephone directories for 276 metropolitan areas in the United States and Canada. Despite several technical problems in study design and data procurement, the results are encouraging. A total of fourteen regions can be discerned, some not previously described, while several correspond nicely with culture areas previously mapped from other evidence. Inclusion in the checklist of terms with cultural, but not specifically regional, overtones enables us to compute and map variations in the strength of regional feeling from place to place. This study suggests further dimensions of North America's social and cultural geography that might be derived from a deeper probing of the names applied to our highly varied organized activities.

HOW seriously should the serious geographer take the vernacular, or popular, regions of his country? This breed of areal entities is quite distinct from the more familiar creatures we customarily study. A vernacular region is neither something created by governmental, corporate, or journalistic fiat, nor the scientist's artifact, however sophisticated or otherwise, contrived to serve some specific scholarly or pedagogic purpose.¹ On the con-

trary, "the vernacular region is the product of the spatial perception of average people," the shared, spontaneous image of territorial reality, local or not so local, hovering in the minds of the untutored.²

Comparative Studies on Southern Asia, Monograph No. 5 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1967), pp. 89-91.

² The entire definition merits repetition: "Perceptual or vernacular regions are those perceived to exist by their inhabitants and other members of the population at large. They exist as part of popular or folk culture. Rather than being the intellectual creation of the professional geographer, the vernacular region is the product of the spatial perception of average people. Rather than being based on carefully chosen, quantifiable criteria, such regions are composites of the mental maps of the population," Terry G. Jordan, "Perceptual Regions in Texas," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 68 (1978), p. 293. The origins of most vernacular regions are obscure or unexplored. It is entirely

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¹ This three-fold classification of geographic regions in terms of origin is suggested by Joseph E. Schwartzberg, "Prolegomena to the Study of South Asian Regions and Regionalism," in Robert I. Crane, ed., *Regions and Regionalism in South Asian Studies: an Exploratory Study*.

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TABLE 1.—TERMS COUNTED AND ANALYZED IN THE STUDY OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NAMES OF METROPOLITAN ENTERPRISES

ACADIA (N) ^a	METRO(POLITAN)
AMERICAN ^b	MID-AMERICA(N) ^a
APACHE	MID-ATLANTIC, MIDDLE ATLANTIC ^a
APOLLO	MIDLAND
ARGO, ARGONAUT, ARGOSY	MIDWAY
ATLANTIC ^a	MIDDLE WEST, MIDWEST(ERN) ^a
ATLAS	MISSION
AZTEC(A)	MODERN(E)
CANADA, CANADIAN ^c	MONARCH
CENTENNIAL	NATIONAL, NATIONWIDE ^{b,c}
CENTRAL	NEW ENGLAND ^a
CENTURY	NORTH AMERICAN
CITY(WIDE)	NORTHEAST(ERN)
CLASSIC	NORTHERN ^a
COAST(AL)	NORTHLAND ^a
COLONIAL, COLONY	NORTH STAR
COLUMBIA ^b	NORTHWEST(ERN) ^a
COMMUNITY	OLYMPIA(IC) (US)
CONTINENTAL	PACIFIC ^a
COUNTRY(SIDE)	PHOENIX
CROWN	PILGRIM
DELTA	PIONEER
DIXIE ^a	REGAL, ROYAL(E)
DOMINION ^c	REGENCY, REGENT
DOWNTOWN(ER)	SOUTHEAST(ERN) ^a
EAGLE	SOUTHERN, SOUTHLAND ^a
EASTERN ^a	SOUTHWEST(ERN) ^a
EMPIRE, IMPERIAL	STAR
FEDERAL ^b	SUN(BEAM) (LIGHT) (SHINE)
FRONTIER	SUNSET
GLOBAL, GLOBE	TOWN & COUNTRY
GULF ^a	UNITED STATES, U.S. ^b
HOLIDAY	UNIVERSAL
INTERNATIONAL	VICTORIA
MAPLE LEAF	VIKING
MAYFAIR	VILLAGE
	WESTERN ^a

^a Regional term.^b National term within U.S.^c National term within Canada.

consulted the directories in various college and municipal libraries, hotels, airports, private homes, and other targets of opportunity, but, above all, in the magnificent Library of Congress collection.

The enterprises whose names were tallied comprise all manner of organized, nongovernmental activity, whether for profit or otherwise, and include retail, wholesale, service, and manufacturing firms, associations, schools, churches, hospitals, places of entertainment, apartment buildings, cemeteries, parks, and a miscellany of other places and activities that happen to be listed in a city directory.

Perhaps the most crucial, and certainly the most difficult, phase of the project was com-

piling an acceptable checklist of terms. My selection of words with strong locational and cultural content or overtones was based upon: 1) a determination that they occurred often enough in enough different places to merit inclusion, and 2) the judgment that they conveyed interesting information about the conceptual worlds of North Americans at the relatively macroscopic scale of this investigation (Table 1). Although my prime objective was to identify and delimit the grosser vernacular regions—and thus the listing of the more obvious regional and territorial-locational terms—I could not resist the opportunity to include a number of items that are not specifically geographical but which might convey

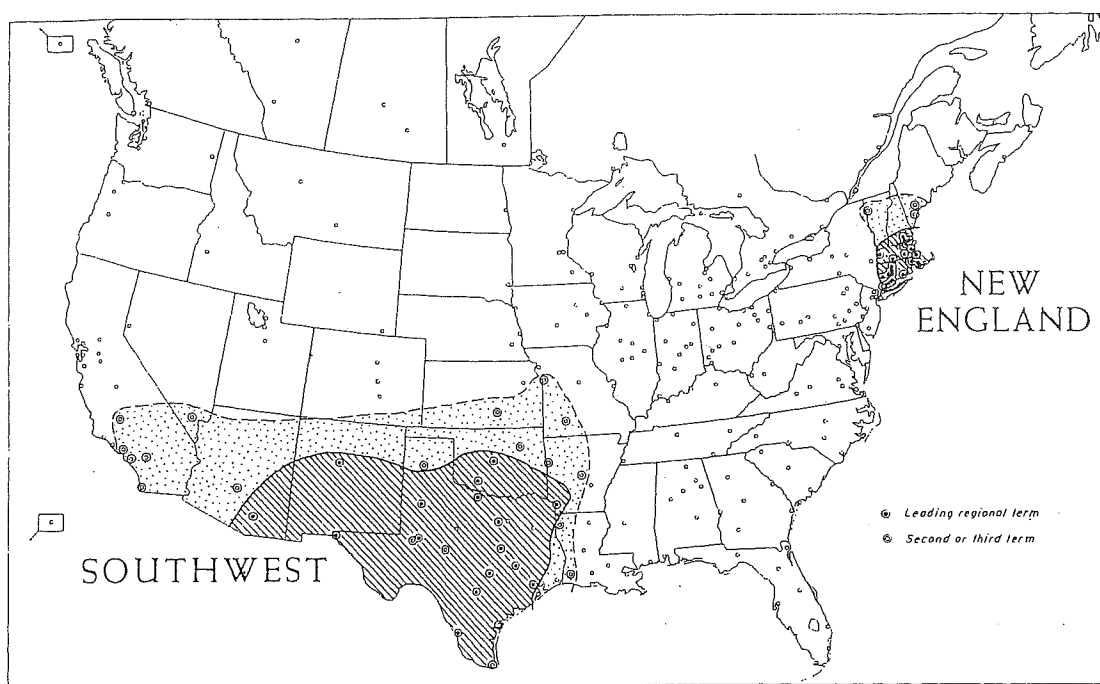


FIG. 3. New England; the Southwest.

the place's regional terms. It is safe to assume, I believe, that this cluster of terms is convergent in cultural meaning. It is important to note that *Southern* and its terminological ilk

are only incidentally locational or latitudinal. The metropolises of the southwestern quadrant of the United States are no further from the equator than the South, essentially a so-

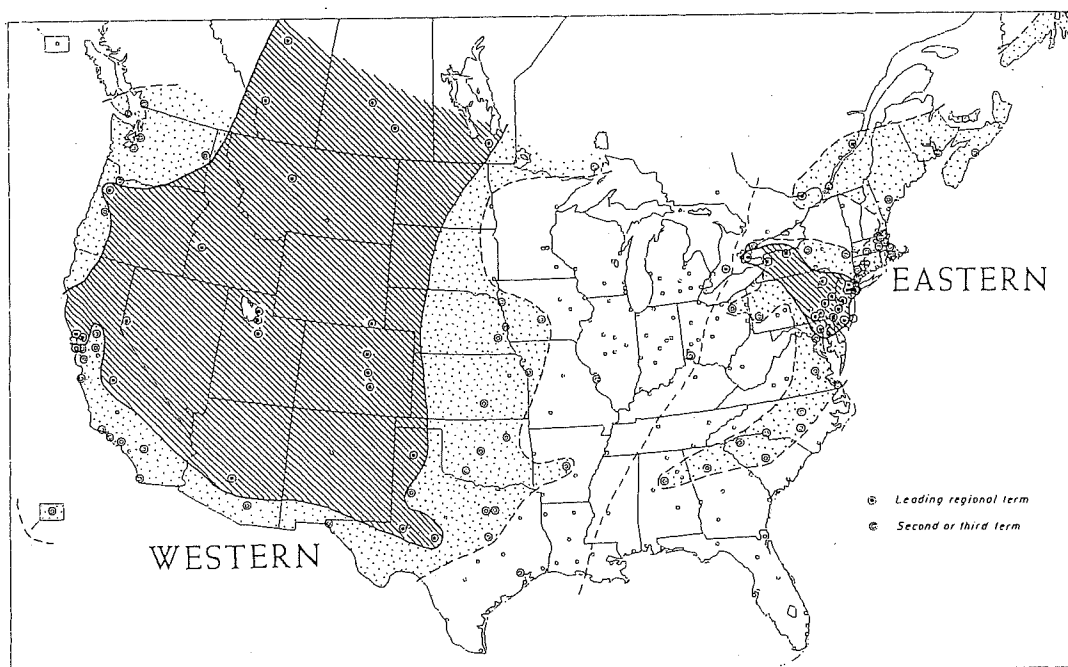


FIG. 4. The East; the West.

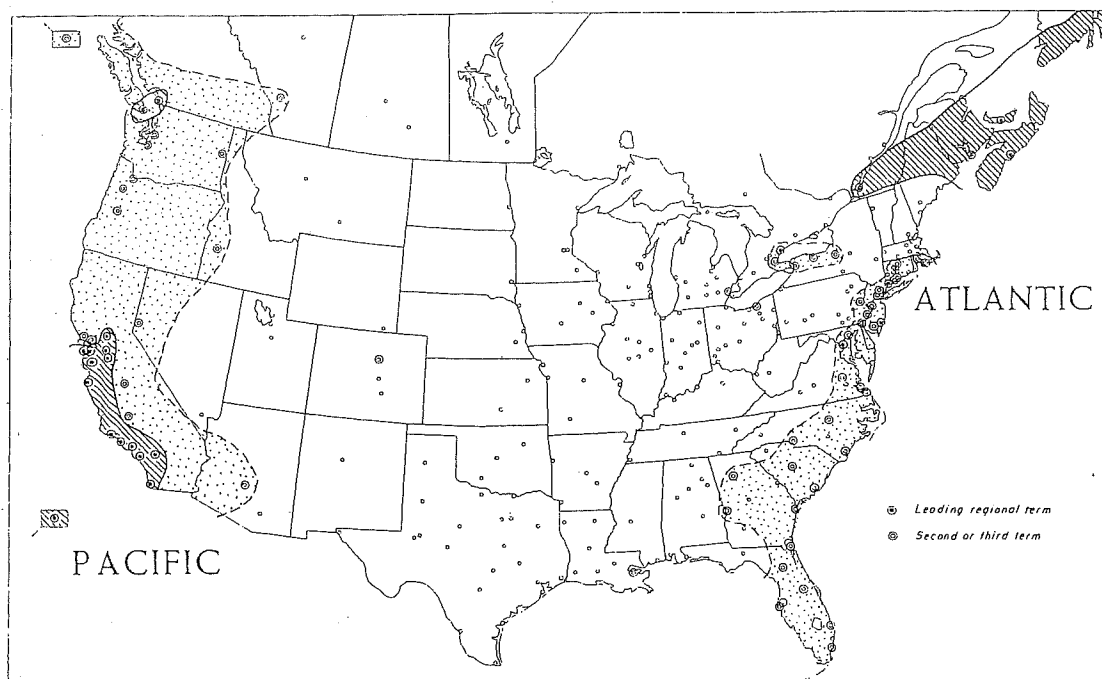


FIG. 5. The Atlantic Region: the Pacific Region.

ciocultural rather than a geodetic entity. In fact, Southern terms are totally absent in Honolulu, the southernmost of our metropolises! The foregoing observation also applies to

the terms *Western*, *Eastern*, and, with much less force, to *Northern* (except in Canada, where, in sharp contrast, *Northern* is saturated with sociocultural connotations, and

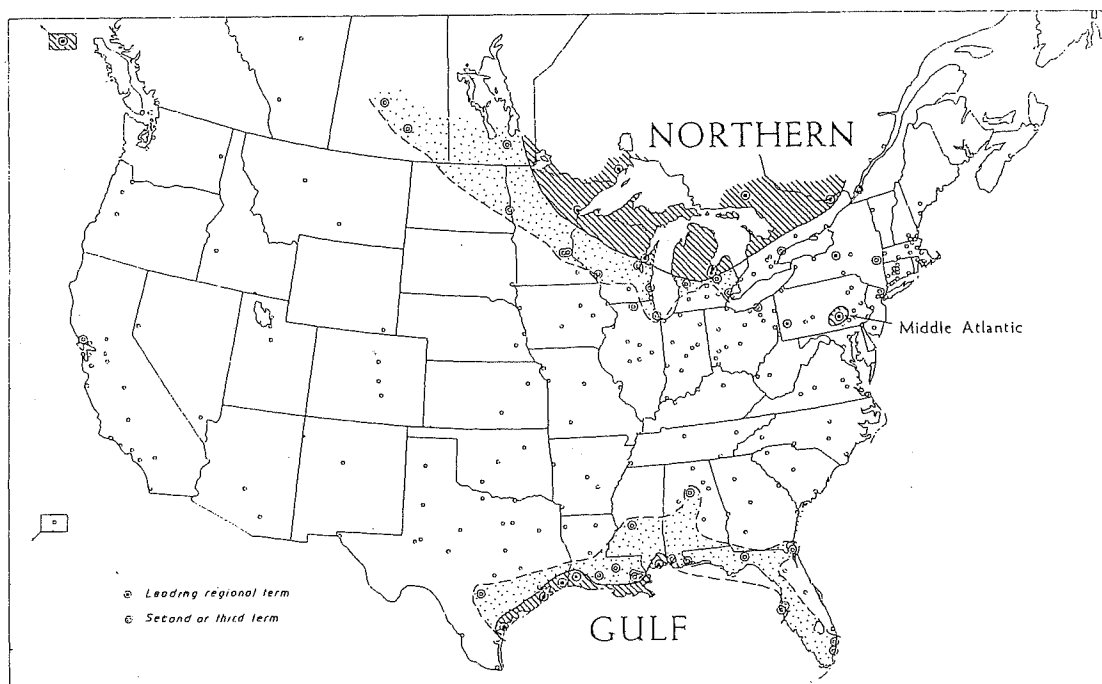


FIG. 6. The North; the Middle Atlantic Region; the Gulf Region.