

All Our Teams

The Geography of SEC Fandom and Southern Identity

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Abstract

Scholars have argued that the American South is one of the most distinct regions in the United States (Zelinsky 1980). Its inhabitants culturally identify with the geographic area and seek to express and retain that identity in many ways such as naming their businesses using the term “Southern” (Reed 1976), reading *Southern Living* (Lauder 2011), and eating collards (Davis and Morgan 2015). Geographers can map these cultural expressions and ones like them to better understand the spatial qualities of the South. One identifier of Southern culture is the intense and distinct fandom surrounding college football, specifically the variety played in the Southeastern Conference. Since the rise of Southern football to prominence in the Roaring 20s to the past decade that has seen eight SEC national championships, the South has taken a great interest in college football and has held autumn Saturdays when SEC football is played in high cultural esteem. SEC football can therefore be mapped to show the cores and peripheries of the conference’s geographical footprint in relation to the traditional cultural South. Spatial data from indicators of SEC fandom such as the 14 member institutions’ locations of ticket sales to games, donations made to the athletic departments, affiliate radio stations, internet searches, origin of athletes, and availability of vanity license plates are mapped here to approximate just where “SEC Country” is.

Introduction

I was traveling from my home in Virginia one summer to conduct research for this project in Alabama and Mississippi. And, in the spirit of Chuck Kovacik and John Shelton Reed, I made it my mission to sample the local barbecue fare on my trip. Upon the recommendation of college football broadcaster Todd Blackledge, I stopped in Knoxville, TN at Dead End BBQ on the west end of town and ordered a pulled pork plate. It was a neat little joint, the type of local joint that has decorations all over the walls, good greasy food, and a friendly wait service. One particular decoration that caught my attention was the complete set of full-size helmets from each SEC team situated upon the bar's awning. Apparently, I was not the only one to notice; a father of the family sitting at the table next to mine pointed up and told his family, "Look, they have football helmets of all our teams." Within this one statement, this man had expressed not only his appreciation for the restaurant's décor but also clues to his college football fandom, membership in imagined communities, and regional identity.

The SEC, or the Southeastern Conference, is a grouping of fourteen institutions that compete against each other in a number of collegiate athletic competitions. The group was founded in 1932 and is characterized in modern times by the rabid fandom surrounding its football programs. The SEC is also integrally connected to the American South. Collegiate athletic conferences were founded as general reflections of the United States' cultural regions, and the SEC represented the Deep South.¹ Through the conference realignments of the 21st century, prominent NCAA athletic conferences have added and dropped teams with little regard for this traditional regional reflection except for the SEC; it still geographically reflects the South. This reflection is recognized by the

¹ John F. Rooney & Richard Pillsbury, *Atlas of American Sport* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1992), 63.

fans of the SEC's member institutions and helps to fuel and construct their sense of Southern identity.

To someone living in the region, this connection between sport and identity is so obvious that it may be unconsciously recognized. When I was growing up in Alabama (described as “possibly the worst place on earth to acquire a healthy perspective on the importance of spectator sports”²), the phenomenon of SEC football surrounded me. I recognized it by teams' logos on the walls and windows of my elementary school classrooms. I recognized it in the rush in my household to complete the Saturday chores in time for the 2:30 SEC game on television. And I recognized it by the grief my friends who were Auburn fans would give those who supported Alabama after the Tigers beat the Tide in the Iron Bowl not only on the Monday after but for the entirety of the next year. When I moved to Virginia, I perceived my new home as less Southern in part because of the diminished prevalence of Southeastern Conference football.

The notion of Southern identity is a complex one that cannot be boiled down to just college football fandom. People express their regional identity in many ways: consuming media, cooking and eating foods, or naming businesses or streets with particular words.³ This holds true for the American South. However, a discussion of the “cultural geography of the South would be amiss without [including] football.”⁴ Since the

² Warren St. John, *Rammer Jammer Yellowhammer: A Journey into the Heart of Fan Mania* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004) 1.

³ Tracy Lauder, “Southern Identity in Southern Living Magazine,” *Journal of Geography* 111, no. 1 (2011).

Edward H. Davis & John T. Morgan, *Collards: A Southern Tradition from Seed to Table* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2015).

John Shelton Reed, “The Heart of Dixie: An Essay in Folk Geography” *Social Forces* 54, no. 4 (Jun, 1976).

Derek H. Alderman, “When Exotic Becomes Native: Taming, Naming, and Kudzu as Regional Symbolic Capital.” *Southeastern Geographer* 55, no. 1 (2015).

⁴ Larry Joe Morgan and Ted Klimasewski, “Pigskin Power Region: Dominance of Southern Collegiate Football,” *Southeastern Geographer* 55, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 215.

rise of Southern football to prominence in the Roaring 20s to the past decade that has seen considerable on-field success for the SEC, the South has taken a great interest in college football. Fans of the SEC use their fandom for their team and conference as an avenue for expressing their Southern pride and identity. This aspect of the Southern cultural mosaic can be examined geographically to gain insights into where SEC football is prevalent and subsequently impacts the lives of its fans. Therefore, this work seeks to explain the connection between SEC football fandom and Southern identity by utilizing cultural geographic and GIS methodologies to examine just where the fans of “all our teams” live.

Literature Review

A fundamental feature of this work is its attempt to approximate a perceptual region based on the college football fanbase of the Southeastern Conference in relation to the cultural region of the South. The concept of regions is one that has been explored and has evolved in the discipline of geography for a long time. The authors of *The Human Mosaic*; Domosh, Neumann, Price, and Jordan-Bychkov; describe regions as a “geographical unit based on characteristics and functions of culture” and uphold regions as an important part of cultural and human geography.⁵ The study of regions at one time meant an in-depth description and analysis of a place; works by Odum and Vance that will be discussed later are examples of this early regionalism. Even then, geographers acknowledged regional study as a valuable tool for social research and understanding place.⁶ There existed an idea that the region existed as an entity “distinct from the whole;” that distinction necessitates the study of both the part and the whole to truly understand the part.⁷ The study of regions shifted towards a great effort to define formal and vernacular regions with defined borders; the many examples of delineations of vernacular regions mentioned below are a reflection of the study of this period. Regions were still examined as entities with meaning and significance.

In modern geographical study, however, this assumption has been questioned. Some argue that globalization, “modernity, and urbanization [have] intervened [that make] it very difficult to separate out the particular attributes of regions from the global”

⁵ Mona Domosh, Roderick P. Neumann, Patricia L. Price, and Terry G. Jordan, eds, *The Human Mosaic: A Cultural Approach to Human Geography* 11th ed. (New York: W.H. Freedman and Company, 2010), 6.

⁶ Rupert Vance, “The Regional Concept as a Tool for Social Research” in *Regionalism and the South*, John Shelton Reed and Daniel Joseph Singal, eds (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 155.

⁷ Ibid, 155.

ones that influence regions.⁸ Regional distinction, it was argued, could be attributed to “broader social forces surrounding class, gender, and social divisions that combined to bring regions into being.”⁹ Geographers today continue to critique the role of regions in the function of the discipline. Tim Cresswell describes the new regional geographical thought as centered on “the belief that regions are social constructs” rather than entities waiting to be discovered, defined, and described.¹⁰ Anssi Paasi agrees when he writes that “regions are seen as the results and expressions of social relations that may have their origin in complex institutional contexts” rather than areas that exist at the beginning of a social process.¹¹ He acknowledges the tensions between scholars in this modern debate on regions, their significance, and their boundaries. Some hold that “regions and their identities are very meaningful elements” and other think that “regions are results of all kinds of interactions that do not have fixed identities.”¹² However, many still hold that “regions are more than just territorial spaces” and do have some sort of meaning; that meaning is another matter debated.¹³

This disciplinarian debate over the validity, description, and definition of regions has affected the study of vernacular regions. A vernacular region is “one that is perceived to exist by its inhabitants as evidenced by the widespread acceptance and use of a ...regional name.”¹⁴ This approach utilizes a more democratic method of identifying

⁸ Tim Cresswell, *Geographic Thought: A Critical Introduction* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 69.

⁹ Ibid, 69.

¹⁰ Ibid, 71.

¹¹ Anssi Paasi, “The Region, Identity, and Power,” *Social and Behavioral Sciences* 14, no. 1 (2011): 10.

¹² Ibid, 11.

¹³ Van Luk Langenhove, “What is a Region? Towards a Statehood Theory of Regions,” *Contemporary Politics* 19, no. 4 (2013): 474.

¹⁴ Mona Domosh, Roderick P. Neumann, Patricia L. Price, and Terry G. Jordan, eds, *The Human Mosaic: A Cultural Approach to Human Geography* 11th ed. (New York: W.H. Freedman and Company, 2010), 10.

regions than other methods that are more academically-based. This is to say that the people in the region in question are allowed to define their own region; vernacular regions are not thought up in a classroom but are rather discovered by many means of examining popular culture or thought. Scholars favorable toward vernacular regional geography maintain that “naming is a powerful vehicle for promoting identification.”¹⁵ Because of the power that naming possesses, it has been used as a major way to define vernacular regions and a means of their role in society at large.

Sociologist John Shelton Reed penned a seminal article that used naming to define “the South” and “Dixie” in the southern United States. He connects the idea of regionalism with South by using business names to define the region and argues that “the paramount example of a self-conscious regional group in the United States has...been found in the southeastern states.”¹⁶ The region he found was a vernacular region; he bounded an area on a map which reflected “that part of the country where the people think they are Southerners.”¹⁷ He observed the mental geography of Southerners by looking at where business names contained the two terms on the premise that “residents of Southern areas should be more likely to use the word ‘Southern’ in the names of their businesses;” the results can then be mapped to estimate the range and extent of a vernacular region.¹⁸

For this study of the fanbase of the Southeastern Conference, a comparative analysis of that region and “the South” as defined by other scholars will be important in deciding the extent to which SEC fandom is important in the larger cultural region.

¹⁵ Derek H. Alderman, “Place, Naming, and the Interpretation of Cultural Landscapes,” *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (2008): 195.

¹⁶ John Shelton Reed, “The Heart of Dixie: An Essay in Folk Geography” *Social Forces* 54, no. 4 (Jun, 1976): 925.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 925.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 926.

Reed's map of "the South" will be of primary importance in this comparison. Dixie will not be used because it connotes "an allegiance to the Confederate or Old South," a component that is important in Southern culture still today but is no longer adequate to represent the more inclusive region that is "the South."¹⁹ The region of the South is more culturally diverse than simply an expression of the memory of the region and its ideals during the Civil War, and working with both variables is really "measuring different concepts."²⁰ In seeking to identify the perceived boundaries of the South, multiple updates to the study have been completed by Reed himself and others.²¹ Modern scholars such as Cooper, Knotts, and Ambinakudige note that the boundaries of the South are noticeably eroding.²² However, the much smaller vernacular region of Dixie is shrinking at a much faster rate. Ambinakudige also finds that rural areas typically have a stronger sense of Southern identity than urban areas.²³

Another classic work that was inspired by the methods of Reed is "North America's Vernacular Regions" by geographer Wilbur Zelinsky. Instead of looking at simply one cultural region, however, Zelinsky looks at business names from all across the United States to determine what vernacular regions exist. He found the South to be the "sturdiest of [the] vernacular regions" found.²⁴ Zelinsky explains the culture of the regions delineated in his article in his book, *The Cultural Geography of the United*

¹⁹ Derek H. Alderman and Robert Maxwell Beavers, "Heart of Dixie Revisited: An Update on the Geography of Naming in the American South," *Southeastern Geographer* 39, no. 2 (November 1999): 191.

²⁰ Christopher A. Cooper and H. Gibbs Knotts, "Declining Dixie: Regional Identification in the Modern American South," *Social Forces* 88, no. 3 (March 2010): 1092.

²¹ John Shelton Reed, "The Incredible Shrinking South," in *Surveying the South: Studies in Regional Sociology* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press), 1993.

²² Shrinidhi Ambinakudige, "Revisiting 'the South' and 'Dixie': Delineating Vernacular Regions Using GIS," *Southeastern Geographer* 49, no. 3 (2009): 240.

²³ *Ibid.*, 247.

²⁴ Wilbur Zelinsky, "North America's Vernacular Regions," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70, no. 1 (Mar, 1980): 8.

States. He discusses the regions of the United States as separate parts of the whole. The South is included in this discussion in the context of its “migratory origins in which it attracted foreign-born Caucasian[s] in significant numbers.”²⁵ Zelinsky also recognizes the “difficulties in delimiting and assigning subregions” and borders to the South.²⁶

Many geographers have put forth their own models of the nation’s vernacular regions. Joel Garreau’s *The Nine Nations of North America* presents the cultural regions of North America as imagined alternative states, entities with fixed borders and capitals.²⁷ This is more along the same train of thought as Cresswell and Langenhove about the ideas of a region-state. This work is especially focused on bounding areas, and he gives the border areas a great bit of focus to justify his lines. Garreau estimates his own regions based on dividing factors such as “mountains, deserts, and rivers” but also “architecture, music, [and] language.”²⁸ His region that is analogous to the South is called Dixie; the terms are used interchangeably. He acknowledges the ambiguity of his rather liberal borders for the region. Atlanta, Georgia, the site of the SEC football championship game each year, is the capital of Dixie in his model.

Raymond Gastil also delineates cultural regions of the United States, but he does so by more than the minds of the US’s inhabitants. He considers a wide variety of variables that help construct regions such as extra-American origin of the population, socioeconomic status, religion, housing styles, and dialect. The South found to exist is much more inclusive than the ones found by either Zelinsky or Reed, but he admits that trusting the reliability of borders between American regions, particularly the one

²⁵ Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States: A Revised Edition* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), 122.

²⁶ Ibid, 124.

²⁷ Joel Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1981).

²⁸ Ibid, 2.

dividing North and South, is difficult because of the amount of cultural “overlap” that is evident by a gradual change when one moves from one region to another.²⁹ It is a reminder that regional boundaries are not hard, fixed lines but rather are geographers’ somewhat arbitrary creations.” Gastil proceeds to slice up the South into several sub-regions and then again into districts accompanied by a description of the commonalities and differences between these entities.

While valuable as additional examples to define and examine the South, neither the work by Garreau or Gastil are very helpful to the present study. Both define very inclusive Southern regions that are approximated by less scrutinous methods than that used by Reed. The spatial area of athletic conferences that is comparatively small makes such a wide-reaching regional approximation difficult to work with because far more teams’ fanbases would fit within each cultural region. An all-too-inclusive “South” would mean that most Southeastern Conference member institutions would have fanbases fitting automatically inside that border. A vernacular South based on focused expressions of regional identity will be more useful in determining the validity of SEC football fandom as a legitimate expression of Southern identity in its own right.

James Shortridge is another geographer to have worked heavily with vernacular regions. His focus was on the Middle West as a region, and his 1989 book on the region demonstrates a comprehensive analysis of a vernacular region.³⁰ He gives weight to cognitive maps of the region produced by people’s perception as to where the region exists. He also took a stab at analyzing vernacular regions on a national level by analyzing the change in directional labels (east, midwest, south, and west) nationally

²⁹ Raymond D. Gastil, *Cultural Regions of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 175.

³⁰ James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1989).

and emphasized the important fact that “regional labels are dynamic, not static entities.”³¹

His results are fascinating and offer good points to consider when connecting cultural regions to the fanbase of an athletic conference. When considering the South, he found that “Southern affiliation is highest in a relative sense among urban people” as opposed to typical hypotheses.³² The most important findings relevant to the SEC discussion are his observations on the increasing self-affiliation of those from Virginia and the Carolinas with the East and abandoning the South. This “invasion of the South” was a continual process during the time of the article’s publication and has been shown by updates on J.S. Reed’s work on the South to still be occurring.³³ He calls this area “the Atlantic Coast transition zone” between the East and South, and while this area still identifies “more frequently with the South than the East...data suggest that these places may soon join Maryland, West Virginia, and [DC] as self-perceived Eastern locations.”³⁴

It is interesting to consider that Shortridge acknowledges the power of athletic conferences to influence a place’s name with his notion of an Atlantic coast transition zone.³⁵ At the time of publication, 7 schools in Virginia and the Carolinas were members of the Atlantic Coast Conference that included Maryland, and Eastern identifier, but none belonged to the Southeastern Conference. While South Carolina’s flagship university moved to the SEC in 1992, no other conference moves to the South have occurred in the other two states. All other schools have remained in the ACC that has evolved to look more like Zelinsky’s Atlantic region than a Southeast or South Atlantic

³¹ James R. Shortridge, “Changing Usage of Four American Region Labels,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no. 3 (September, 1987): 335.

³² Ibid, 331.

³³ Ibid, 329.

³⁴ Ibid, 331.

³⁵ Ibid, 334.

region.³⁶ Parallels between the lack of Southern regional identification and ACC-dominated states should be noted.

Shortridge also published an article on the vernacular regions in Kansas.³⁷ This has served as a template for many subsequent attempts by geographers to take a state and divide it up into many parts instead of looking at a larger region such as the United States as a whole like Zelinsky did or the South as Reed do. This approach to regional geography has been used through the years up until the modern day. Liesch, Dunklee, Legg, Feig, and Krause have just recently used John Shelton Reed's tactic of examining business names to map the vernacular regions of Michigan. Their work gives weight to the modern examination of vernacular regions in the discipline of geography and answers the question of "How small is too small for a region?" by giving some pretty tiny regions in Michigan.³⁸ John T. Morgan looked at several smaller vernacular regions of this nature closely in different articles on vernacular regions within Appalachia by using methods such as internet searches to examine a region.³⁹ Appalachia as a vernacular region itself was defined and examined in 2011. The authors, C. Cooper and Knotts who also worked to update Reed's map of the South and Dixie, acknowledge the crossover between the South and Appalachia and note this tension by reporting that "74 percent of Southern Appalachians think of themselves as Southerners- a larger percentage than

³⁶ Wilbur Zelinsky, "North America's Vernacular Regions," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70, no. 1 (Mar, 1980): 10.

³⁷ James R. Shortridge, "Vernacular Regions in Kansas," *American Studies* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1980).

³⁸ Matthew Liesch, Linda M. Dunklee, Robert J. Legg, Anthony D. Feig, and Austin Jena Krause, "Use of Business-Naming Practices to Delineate Vernacular Regions: A Michigan Example," *Journal of Geography* 114, no. 5 (2015):188.

³⁹ John T. Morgan and Leonard W. Brinkman, "The Renaming of a Tennessee Region," *The Geographical Bulletin* 37, no. 1 (May, 1995).

Mayfield, Michael W., and John T. Morgan. "The 'Oldest River' as an Appalachian Popular Region," *Journal of Geography* 104, no. 2 (2005).

many parts of the peripheral South.”⁴⁰ The area mapped as Appalachia includes Knoxville, home of the University of Tennessee of the SEC, but the area as a whole is weaker “than identification with the [modern] South.”⁴¹

A few other examples of in-depth geographical and cultural analyses of areas within the South or relating to areas of potential SEC fandom are valuable to have in mind when looking at either the geographical fanbase of the conference or the culture of the South as a region. Many of these studies attribute college athletics as an aid in place naming.

For instance, Lamme III and Oldakowski identified a region in Florida around Gainesville called “Gator Country, [a term] associated with the University of Florida...which employs the nickname Gators for their athletic teams.”⁴² Again, no other athletically-based region is found, collegiately or professionally (Florida State or Miami of the ACC). Lamme and Oldakowski also point out a cultural division in the state between North Florida and the rest of the state. Wilbur Zelinsky also notes Florida’s “sharp north-south [dichotomy].”⁴³ This is important to consider when thinking about the territorial extent of the University of Florida’s fandom when compared and contrasted with the South because “in northern and panhandle Florida, there are a multitude of cultural elements associated with the Deep South.”⁴⁴ Reed, Zelinsky, and others recognize the distinction between peninsular Florida and the South, and the

⁴⁰ Christopher A. Cooper, H. Gibbs Knotts, & Katy L. Elders, “A Geography of Appalachian Identity,” *Southeastern Geographer* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 460.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 463.

⁴² Ary J. Lamme III & Raymond K. Oldakowski, “Vernacular Areas in Florida,” *Southeastern Geographer* 22, no 2 (November 1982): 106.

⁴³ Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States: A Revised Edition* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), 114.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 100.

resulting “popular regions of Florida correlate closely to [that] cultural divide.”⁴⁵ The University of Florida straddles that cultural divide with Florida State at Tallahassee included in the South and the University of Miami excluded.

Additionally, in Barker’s “Major Vernacular Regions of Tennessee,” the state’s flagship university in Knoxville bears the nickname “Volunteers.” That name as a “regional label exhibited statewide appeal...centered on Knox county.”⁴⁶ He attributes part of this identification to “the University of Tennessee’s sports teams-the Volunteers.”⁴⁷ No perceptual region is identified for any other major university or sports team (Vanderbilt, Memphis [AAC], Tennessee Titans [NFL] etc.). This region is in East Tennessee, one of the “three Tennessees” that the state “proudly advertises,” symbolically represents in its flag, and functionally defines for administrative purposes.⁴⁸

James Shortridge referenced the authority that collegiate athletics had in place-naming because of the work of James K. Good on the vernacular regions of Arkansas. This is because of the prevalence of the “association of Arkansas with the Southwest [that] is probably influenced in part by the University of Arkansas’ membership [at the time] in the Southwest Athletic Conference.”⁴⁹ He attributes “the significance of this athletic affiliation” to the fervor of the fans of the Razorbacks.⁵⁰ Southwest was the second only to the South as a regional identifier; this latter term was present all over the

⁴⁵ Ibid, 108.

⁴⁶ James Curtis Barker, “The Major Vernacular Regions of Tennessee,” *Theses, Dissertations, and Capstones* 455 (2005): 23.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 23.

⁴⁸ Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States: A Revised Edition* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), 114.

⁴⁹ James K. Good, “The Vernacular Regions of Arkansas.” *Journal of Geography* 80, no. 5 (1981): 184.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 184.

state with “some counties bordering Missouri...as commonly associated with the South as...those contiguous to Louisiana.”⁵¹ The apparent connection between college football and Southern regional identity should not be overlooked.

Missouri is an interesting state to investigate in the context of Southern identity. James Collier examines the vernacular regions of Missouri, but he did so under the premise of the state being in the Midwest. In fact, Collier never directly addresses Missouri’s place in any larger geographic region of the United States. The only discussion on the South and the Midwest comes at the end when he discusses the Southeastern Lowlands, a province in the far southeast of the state by the Mississippi River bordering Arkansas and Kentucky that “culturally...is more like the South than the Midwest.”⁵² This implies that Collier assumes that the state as a whole is more Midwestern. To close the article, he notes that the region “is the least typical of Missouri and the Midwest of all parts of the State.”⁵³

One region that Collier does not observe within Missouri that Zelinsky does allude to is “the Little Dixie region of central Missouri.”⁵⁴ This was a region found to exist by Robert Crisler in 1948 and 1950 as “an area where political and cultural ties have been with the South since its early days of settlement” from where its inhabitants migrated.⁵⁵ This region was delineated primarily by its tendency to vote for Democrats with the Solid South, but Crisler also studied its popular usage and found that it was a term used as an everyday colloquialism as well. Douglas Hurt also acknowledged the

⁵¹ Ibid, 183.

⁵² James E. Collier, “Geographic Regions of Missouri.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 45, no. 4 (1955): 391.

⁵³ Ibid, 392.

⁵⁴ Wilbur Zelinsky, “North America’s Vernacular Regions,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70, no. 1 (Mar, 1980): 3.

⁵⁵ Robert M. Crisler, “Missouri’s ‘Little Dixie,’” *Missouri Historical Review* 52, no. 2 (January 1948): 131.

region's existence and its importance in Civil War Missouri, but he bases his region on culture and economic criteria. Jeff Stone, another scholar on Little Dixie, agrees with Hurt's delineation and uses the same regional definition in his study of slavery and education in the region. Hurt's area of study only includes seven counties while Crisler defined Little Dixie with thirteen; only four of these overlap.

One of those four overlapping counties is Boone County, host to Columbia and the University of Missouri. Columbia was at the heart of Little Dixie with apparent ties to the South and Confederacy. These ties are even remembered today in the mascot of the University of Missouri; the significance of this will be explored later. Regionally, however, it is important to keep in mind that Mizzou exists in a region of Southern sympathies within a state that is at the crossroads of US regions.

Geographers whose focus is broader than just Missouri also struggle where to place the state in the larger cultural regional framework of the United States. Wilbur Zelinsky notes that Missouri was one state that fosters a "sharp north-south [dichotomy]" and places his northern boundary of the South through southeast Missouri.⁵⁶ Raymond Gastil's Midwest-South dividing line raises further north than Zelinsky's and bisects Kansas City and St. Louis; Columbia is entirely included in the South, specifically the "Upland South district."⁵⁷ Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov delineated a similar Upland South to Gastil's (though Jordan-Bychkov included much more of Texas than did Gastil), and several areas of middle and eastern Missouri are included in his index of "upland Southern-ness."⁵⁸ This key subregion will be examined later in more

⁵⁶ Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States: A Revised Edition* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), 114.

Wilbur Zelinsky, "North America's Vernacular Regions," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70, no. 1 (Mar, 1980): 14.

⁵⁷ Raymond D. Gastil, *Cultural Regions of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 174.

⁵⁸ Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov, *The Upland South: The Making of an American Folk Region and*

detail.

A challenging state to try and regionalize is “Texas, long a cultural paradox.”⁵⁹ This is tackled principally by two geographers, the first of which is D.W. Meinig. In an extended essay about the state and many of its cultural parameters, Meinig parses Texas into cultural regions consistent with the examples above. He holds that the state in whole is “Southern in source,” but not all areas of the state have held on to that identifier.⁶⁰ The area he defines as East Texas is “essentially the western extension of the Old South” where cotton once thrived.⁶¹ The factors of a higher population of African-Americans and religious traditions of “a powerful, deep-rooted Southern fundamentalism” are modern expressions by the subregion of its Southern-ness.⁶² This region of East Texas is often considered a part of the South by other studies (like Reed’s and Zelinsky’s), and Meinig agrees as this region has the most parallels to Southern culture. Others could be considered too like the Gulf Coast that sees a large immigration from Louisiana and Arkansas, Southern states.⁶³ Central Texas, the region in which College Station and Texas A&M, a newcomer to the SEC, are located, is a “great area of diversity.”⁶⁴ It exhibits some Southern political and religious qualities, but it is a region of “social heterogeneity...quite unlike anything to be found anywhere else in Texas.”⁶⁵

The second geographer to deal with Texas is Terry G. Jordan. This ardent believer in the power of the vernacular region and editor of many editions of the *Human Mosaic*

Landscape (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Center for American Places Inc, 2003),

⁵⁹ James R. Shortridge, “Changing Usage of Four American Region Labels,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no. 3 (September, 1987): 331.

⁶⁰ D.W. Meinig, *Imperial Texas: An Interpretive Essay of Cultural Geography* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1969), 90.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 92.

⁶² *Ibid*, 92.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 96.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 108.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 109.

followed up in some ways on Meinig's work on the regions in Texas. Jordan also found East Texas to be a "zone [of the] traditional culture, society, and economy...of the Deep South" while an Upland South "influence of Missouri, Arkansas, [and] Tennessee" exists to the west of it.⁶⁶ Eastern Texas shows "the sharpest borders" within the state and is "loaded with connotations of the Old South and the defeated Confederacy."⁶⁷ Once again, this area is found to be the most Southern. Central Texas was found to "correspond very closely to Meinig's region of this name" that exists as "an area of thorough mixing of the various Texan cultures."⁶⁸ College Station is located right between East and Central Texas according to Jordan with plenty of Southern culture working as influence.

Jordan demonstrates that Texas is a kind of extension of another region that is larger in scope and was mentioned earlier: the Upland South. He holds that the South "bears [a] dual character" and can be fundamentally divided into two parts: the Deep South and the Upland South.⁶⁹ He follows in the tradition laid out by many extended essays on vernacular regions to come before in delineating and describing the Upland South in detail. His resulting region includes areas pertinent to SEC research such as a good portion of Tennessee as well as all of Kentucky, northwest Arkansas, south-central Missouri, and most of East and Central Texas (as he defines it in his previously mentioned article). Areas of western North Carolina and southern Indiana are also included along with a few counties of South Carolina and Virginia. To map this region, Jordan uses many different aspects of folk culture such as log structures, barn types,

⁶⁶ Terry G. Jordan, "Perceptual Regions in Texas," *Geographical Review* 68, no. 3 (July, 1978): 302.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 306.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 302 & 306

⁶⁹ Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov, *The Upland South: The Making of an American Folk Region and Landscape* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Center for American Places Inc, 2003), 3.

characteristics of graveyards, and county courthouse square layouts.

Jordan's assertion of a dual-character South begs the question: does this Upland South region push the traditional boundaries of the South as a whole northwest? Reed and Zelinsky present Souths that are not so liberal in area, but do the regions they find to be "the South" bear in mind the Southern traits that Jordan finds to exist in the Upland South? How are the cultural disparities between Reed's South and Jordan's Upland South handled in terms of mapping Southern identity? This will be an important consideration when considering the Southern-ness of the University of Missouri as well as Texas A&M and Arkansas.

In considering the South's vernacular regional definitions (J.S. Reed), its place within larger geographical frameworks (Zelinsky), and its sub-regions, a comprehensive picture of the South and its culture begins to emerge. Southerners' affinities for naming their region are grounded in a strong and unique culture that binds the region together and makes it culturally and geographically significant.

The early examples of the South studied as a region were the descriptive works of Howard Odum and Rupert Vance. Odum is considered the "father of the systematic study of the South" whose "greatest contribution was the impetus as he gave the concept of the region to the identity of the contemporary South."⁷⁰ His crowning work, *Southern Regions of the United States*, is a work in descriptive geography. Odum concludes based on his observations that "there is no longer...any single entity which may be designated as 'the South.'"⁷¹ Instead, Odum observed the Southeast and Southwest; most of what is considered today as "the South" is in Odum's Southeast region.

⁷⁰ Dewey W. Grantham, *The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 142 & 144.

⁷¹ Howard W. Odum, *Southern Regions of the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 5.

Odum's protégé and colleague Rupert Vance also produced a meaningful work of descriptive of Southern geography, *Human Geography of the South*. He describes the physical features of the region in depth and connects them to human activity, but he holds that it was the region's history, not physical geography, that made the solid South. Vance, like Odum, gives a much more liberal definition of the South than Reed or Zelinsky find but one that is comparable to Gastil or Garreau's regions. He focuses more on the idea of regionalism and its importance in understanding areas. Vance continued to publish in this vein of thinking for years in which he reaffirmed the idea of a region as a tool for social research.⁷² Later in life, his work on the South became less optimistic about the region's uniqueness as he began to predict that urbanism, industrialization, and globalization would consume Southern culture; modern scholars however maintain that the region still possesses distinctive qualities.⁷³

Reaffirmations about the distinctiveness of the region in geographical terms came from many throughout the years including John Frasier Hart who reiterated the ideas of many when he said that "the South has a strong regional sense of identity which is based in large part on the traditional patterns of living, the so-called Southern way of life."⁷⁴ He also wrote a descriptive geographical analysis of the region, but he observed changes that had occurred since Vance and Odum published their works. The geographical reach of his region of the South is also extensive. He also deals with the concept of the New South as a mechanized and urbanized region that still withstands the pressures of integration.

⁷² Rupert B. Vance, "Region," in *Regionalism and the South*, John Shelton Reed and Daniel Joseph Singal, eds (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

⁷³ Rupert B. Vance "The Sociological Implications of Southern Regionalism" in *Regionalism and the South*, John Shelton Reed and Daniel Joseph Singal, eds (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 212.

⁷⁴ John Fraser Hart, *The South* 2nd ed (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co, 1976), 17.

Modern works on Southern geography are still abundant. A whole volume of the *New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* is dedicated to the region's geography. This volume edited by geographer Richard Pillsbury is a good one-stop source for 21st century Southern geography. The volume includes descriptions of the landscape, discussions on the boundaries of the South in the context of J.S. Reed's work, specific regions of the South such as the Upland South, Little Dixie of Missouri, and the prevalence and significance of football, the region's "premier sport."⁷⁵

Works like this have kept Southern studies a viable part of cultural geography. Derek Alderman and William Graves recently wrote on the "Innovations in Southern Studies within Geography" and stated that modern "geographic research on the South continues to keep pace with theoretical and methodological changes in the larger disciplines."⁷⁶ These two argue for a respect of past methods of studying the South while acknowledging, adapting to, and observing newer geographical methods as they evolve.⁷⁷ They also say that the heritage of the region must be engaged with to produce innovative work on the South.⁷⁸ Along with this, the traditional southern studies method of "mapping...cultural phenomena and analyzing the regional patterns these traits take" remains a valuable approach when studying geographies, including geographies of identity which shift over time.⁷⁹

These points are important premises for the present study. I strive to observe the traditions of the past in delineating cultural regions while using new computer-enhanced

⁷⁵ John F. Rooney and Theodore Goudge, "Geography of Sports" in *New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture; Volume 2: Geography*, ed. Richard Pillsbury (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 139.

⁷⁶ Derek H. Alderman & William Graves, "Innovations in Southern Studies within Geography," *Southeastern Geographer* 51, no. 4 (2011): 506.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 510.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 507.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 508.

technology to analyze the data behind it. I acknowledge the importance of mapping geographical data and recognize its significances culturally and its historical connections. I also realize that the cultural region of the South can mean many things to different people; it is a malleable concept based on different historical and contemporary factors and can be a sense of pride or dread depending on the person in question.

Different cultural phenomena to which Alderman and Graves refer have been mapped and analyzed to show their relationship to the larger culture of the South. John Shelton Reed with Dale V. Reed observe the importance of barbecue in North Carolina, and Charles Kovacik and John Winberry do the same for South Carolina to establish the food as a folk dish important to the cultures of the two states and the South.⁸⁰ Edward H. Davis and John T. Morgan also examine food in the form of collards to learn about Southern cultural identity, and foodways.⁸¹ Derek Alderman looks at kudzu, an invasive species to the South, and discusses the plant's unique adopted position in Southern culture and identity.⁸² Tracy Lauder examines the magazine *Southern Living* for an insight into Southern identity because of the magazine's iconic status in the region. Roseman and Shelley who coauthored an article on the geography of radio agree with Lauder when she argues that "popular media...often contribute to our knowledge structures of places and their people."⁸³ I strive to show how SEC football is an adequate addition to this list of Southern attributes that can be spatially displayed and analyzed.

⁸⁰ John Shelton Reed and Dale Volberg Reed with William McKinney, *Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

Charles F. Kovacik & John J. Winberry, *South Carolina: A Geography* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1987).

⁸¹ Edward H. Davis & John T. Morgan, *Collards: A Southern Tradition from Seed to Table* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2015).

⁸² Derek H. Alderman, "When Exotic Becomes Native: Taming, Naming, and Kudzu as Regional Symbolic Capital." *Southeastern Geographer* 55, no. 1 (2015).

⁸³ Tracy Lauder, "Southern Identity in Southern Living Magazine," *Journal of Geography* 111, no. 1 (2011): 27.

Southern identity is a social and psychological construct that manifests itself in many ways beyond the regional identifiers mentioned above. The tendency of geographers is to explore identity with maps, but others write about the culture of the region without worrying so much as to where it exists but what its existence looks like and means. Of course the spatial element cannot be firmly separated from their cultural counterpart, but a choice of focus varies among scholars. The mere term “culture” is a rather broad term that can get tossed about without a succinct understanding of what it means. Stephen Greenblatt discusses culture in terms of “a structure of limits” that facilitates the movement of ideas of the resulting social constraints.⁸⁴ This network of people and ideas create a parameter of acceptability within its people. It is the geographer’s job to then add a comparative spatial element into this system of acceptability and limits.

James Cobb studies the history of Southern identity by tracking the development of the South as a region distinct from the rest of the United States. He writes on the development of the cavalier aura of the Southern gentleman and how that idea was shattered by the Civil War. The war-torn region emerged in opposition to the “North” with an animosity that was centered on race. In this critical period for the development of the “Southern way of life,” segregation was central, and the new “definition of Southern identity effectively excluded the South’s back residents” for a white-dominated regional mindset.⁸⁵ Black Southerners emerging from the Civil Rights Era however found that they could forge their own collective identity that was conscious of region and race, effectively constructing a different notion of Southern identity than had been

⁸⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, “Culture” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 228.

⁸⁵ James Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

presented after the Civil War. Cobb argues that “the overthrow of Jim Crow seemed to result in a broader, biracial effort to keep [the Southern way of life] alive, although often on dramatically different terms.”⁸⁶ This work is a thorough demonstration of the complex construction of regional identity and helps to define what it is to be “Southern.”

Dewey Grantham examines a regional culture in his work on the South in its modern place in America. Grantham works through the messy history of the region and relates it to the culture of the region which he argues is persistently distinct despite efforts, intentional and not as intentional, to integrate the South into the rest of the United States culturally. He understands and weaves together the aspects of industrialization, globalization, literature, religion, history, race relations, and academia to show a progression from reconstruction to the modern era where the South is still a distinct place yet not the same as it was after the Civil War.⁸⁷

When Grantham writes about Southern distinctiveness, he does so often in terms of a cultural dualism or rivalry of South versus North because this is how many others have seen the struggle for regional uniqueness as well. Many sources have presented different ways in which the North tried to subvert the South to its culture and exploit the crippled region during reconstruction. “Carpetbaggers” from the North came to the South to own land and make a profit on it. Efforts to rebuild the South as an industrial counterpart to the North since the ways of the cotton plantation were no more by nature presented an almost colonial feel to the North-South relationship. Attempts were made also to “integrate the ‘backward’ South into the industrial economy controlled by Northern capitalists” also through seemingly philanthropic measures of providing

⁸⁶ Ibid, 338.

⁸⁷ Dewey W. Grantham, *The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 311.

healthcare relief with the underlying motive to “expand Southern agricultural [and industrial] productivity.”⁸⁸ A large part of reconstruction seemed to be based on “the northern model...devoted to reshaping the South in the image of the North.”⁸⁹

Many of the landed white Southern elite did not appreciate this move towards industrialism, and so, as there is with any movement, there was a reaction against it. In 1930, twelve Southerners from Vanderbilt published a book on this issue named *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. This was an early attempt in the twentieth century to begin a discourse on Southern distinctiveness. It advocates for a Southern reaction against industrialization and for a resurgence of the agrarian tradition that had benefitted the region's elites. It deplores the (what it calls) attacks on Southern culture and is in favor of the renewal of the South being organized as a distinct region to avoid “Yankeefication.”⁹⁰ This work was highly controversial and was not accepted by geographers Vance and Odum regardless of their agreement that the South was a distinct place.

James Cobb also agrees that the South is a distinct place, but he does not agree that an attempt by the region to industrialize is a Northern assault through economic means; instead he makes the case that the South was moving away from its agrarian roots to becoming a more industrial region to keep up with the times. This does not destroy or take away from the mindset of Southerners or taint their identity because the region is still strong and distinct in and of itself. He reiterates ideas from Woodward and Grantham that this New South can exist and prosper as a region.

⁸⁸ Brown “Public Health in Imperialism: Early Rockefeller Programs at Home and Abroad.” *American Journal of Public Health* 66, no. 9 (September 1976): 896.

⁸⁹ Dewey W. Grantham, *The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 333.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 333.

Cobb also acknowledges the racist past that is an unavoidable discussion when considering the South. There is a connection between the Confederate flag and Southern identity, he argues.⁹¹ C. Vann Woodward agrees in his anthology *The Burden of Southern History* in which he examines the South as a distinct place but does so hesitantly because of its complicated and unpopular past. And while Cobb recognizes country music as Southern, Woodward says that racism and discrimination has also defined the region. These factors cannot be ignored when discussing aspects and identifiers of a Southern vernacular region be it by collards, kudzu, country music, or SEC football.

Examining the notion of sport and its connection to geography is integral to understanding how SEC football and Southern identity are intertwined. Sports geography exists as a subset of the discipline as a whole, but it has not been given much contemporary attention. While sports literature is wide ranging, reaching from anywhere from psychology to health and human performance, its geographic qualities have been neglected by comparison.

John Rooney has been a central figure in sports geography. Cited as the father of the discipline, he helped spur the original discussions through his own work and the creation of the now-defunct journal, *Sport Place*.⁹² His first book on sports geography is *A Geography of American Sport: From Cabin Creek to Anaheim* where he does innovating work on exploring the spatial distribution of sport in many aspects. This was followed in 1992 with the *Atlas of American Sport* which he co-authored with Richard Pillsbury as the climax of his work.⁹³ A portion of this ambitious work includes an

⁹¹ James C. Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind & Identity in the Modern South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 125).

⁹² John Bale, *Sports Geography* 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2003), 67.

⁹³ Ibid, 68

attempt by the authors to divide the United States into regions based on all sports. The South is partitioned off as the “Pigskin Cult” due to football in its role as “the king of Southern scholastic sports.”⁹⁴ This is confirmation of the theory developed earlier in this paper. Here, it is shown that sports can and are used to identify regions, and Rooney and Pillsbury recognize the prevalence of college football in the South. The discussion of regionalism continues in a football-specific section when the concept of athletic conferences are being discussed. On this subject, they assert that these entities “conform broadly to the traditional geographic regions of the United States.”⁹⁵ Listed are some examples, and the Southeastern Conference is featured as a conference that “largely parallels the traditional Cotton Belt.”⁹⁶ It is important to note that the SEC discussed here does include South Carolina and Arkansas as the two had just joined the conference. In their discussion on these and other realignment changes prior to the atlas’ publication, the authors forecast that “structural changes to align schools with television programming demands may soon become the rule rather than the exception.”⁹⁷ Twenty years later, the modern outlook of college athletics demonstrates just how accurate that prediction was.

Rooney and Pillsbury include a section specifically devoted to the South and football where they state that the two “are now virtually synonymous.”⁹⁸ The majority of the focus centers on the western portion of the area defined by John Shelton Reed as being part of “the South” in Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana. Even since before the publication of this work, the success of Southern teams like Tennessee, Alabama, and

⁹⁴ John F. Rooney & Richard Pillsbury, *Atlas of American Sport* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1992), 23.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 63.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 63.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 63.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 70.

Georgia on a national scale is undeniable, and because the discussion of the South and football by the authors here is framed by success, those schools among others could have been easily included. While the majority of this discussion is based on the success of teams in the region, Rooney and Pillsbury do cite that “football is a way of life” in the region.⁹⁹

Rooney’s most important work as far as this project is concerned, however, is an early journal article, “Up from the Mines and Out from the Parries: Some Geographical Implications of Football in the United States,” that focuses on football and demonstrates that it is a cultural element able to be mapped. He begins the article with a discussion of sports regionalism, how fan loyalties work, and how those loyalties can be mapped by different means like radio and television networks. He then turns specifically to football and discusses it and its historical and cultural connections to the United States as “the game has had a substantial impact on other aspects of American life and culture.”¹⁰⁰

In a more narrow discussion on college football, he cites the importance of tradition in the sport. Under this, he includes rivalries which often “are regional in origin.”¹⁰¹ He also points out booster involvement, football weekends on campus, fight songs, and bowl games as proponents of tradition; the modern SEC engages with each of these still. The conference is mentioned by name in Rooney’s original discussion of the athletic conference as a geographic entity. Written twenty years before his *Atlas of American Sport*, he first states that conferences are organizational in nature and “conform broadly to our concept of the major regions in the United States.” He relates

⁹⁹ Ibid, 70.

¹⁰⁰ John F. Rooney, “Up from the Mines and Out from the Parries: Some Geographical Implications of Football in the United States,” *Geographical Review* 59, no. 4 (October, 1969): 474.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 474.

the 10-school SEC “the area [John Fraser] Hart refers to as the Solid South.”¹⁰² There is also an interesting recognition that “conferences also have a bearing on the way we think about a university;” I would argue that conferences, if inherently regional as Rooney suggests, also would then have a bearing on the way a that region the conference conforms to is thought of. This is supported by his later naming of the South a “Pigskin Cult.” The crux of Rooney’s “Up from the Mines” article is the idea of “player production:” in order to map football regions, he looks at high-school origins and college destinations for each player. While this was a feature typical of his geographical sports work, it does not characterize the entirety of the present study. There is value and a tradition in mapping the sources of players, but the choice to examine the geography of fandom arises from recognition that the identity of ordinary people has the greater cultural significance.

Another foundational name in the area of sports geography is John Bale who “is currently considered by many to be the most influential sports geographer.”¹⁰³ His best known work is *Sports Geography*. Now in its second edition, it is “the most cited book in the field.”¹⁰⁴ The book is an essential for any basic understanding of the matter it presents as it discusses a broad range of topics including theory, economics, architecture of facilities, and globalization. A few sections worthy of notice are some on regional dimensions of sports and the imaginative geographies of sports.

Bale’s analyses of sports regions center around the actual playing of the sport. Rooney’s work on player production is clearly influential here, and the themes of where the game is played are strongly emphasized. Bale cites the Deep South as having

¹⁰² Ibid, 475.

¹⁰³ Niel Conner, “Geography of Sports,” *Oxford Bibliographies* (13 January, 2014): 1, doi: 10.1093/OBO/9780199874002-0067.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 1.

“football fever” to emphasize the region’s development of players.¹⁰⁵ He demonstrates that participation and production can be connected to the South and football, but that is not necessarily indicative of fandom for the college game. Player production cannot be completely predictive of fandom for the game at all levels because, as Rooney acknowledges himself, professional football is much less important to the South than its college counterpart.¹⁰⁶ There must be other motives for the college game to have taken hold as it has. This paper argues that such is the power of fandom and regionalism. Bale’s global analysis of sport through a study of player production and participation works well, but when regions at the sub-national level are examined with a specific level of a popular sport, a simple examination of production is too simplistic.

Bale recognizes, however, that the sports experience is not solely derived from on-field participation. He writes briefly on the experience of fandom as an idea that can be mapped into regions with value to the study of sports. Most of his analyses of sports fandom depend on the fan attending his or her team’s competition. Attendance at a game is a valuable display of fandom, especially in the college football atmosphere. He reprints a map in this section defining the overlapping urban fan regions of four north London football (soccer) clubs by plotting the residential location of game attendees. This is a rare example of the method at the heart of the present study: an attempt to define a fan region geographically. While residential gameday fan data is also used here, the examination encompasses many other aspects of fandom to synthesize a region.

In a continuation of the conversation on stadium attendance, Bale reports five stages of the fan’s experience on gameday: anticipation, journey to (the) spectate,

¹⁰⁵ John F. Rooney, “Up from the Mines and Out from the Parries: Some Geographical Implications of Football in the United States,” *Geographical Review* 59, no. 4 (October, 1969): 491.

¹⁰⁶ John F. Rooney & Richard Pillsbury, *Atlas of American Sport* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1992), 2371.

stadium experience, travel home, and recollection. An additional step for college football gamedays might be tailgating. This is a key pregame event for many spectators that is important in examining fandom because it adds to the hassle and effort of attending a game. Going to a game is not a casual task; it is, especially in the South for college football, an event. Because attendees at a game willingly spend their time, energy, effort, and money, they are here considered valid fans vital in the study of the SEC fan region.

However, Bale's fandom discussion is not inclusive enough. While he gives fair acknowledgement that "in the twenty-first century, support for a sports team does not necessarily involve any physical movement from home to stadium," he does not give sufficient attention to the geographical aspects of sports fandom.¹⁰⁷ Fans exist outside the stadium who connect with the action on the field by television, radio, social media, or news reports the next day. It is important to acknowledge this fact that "fans experience college football in at least two different ways: in person and through the media."¹⁰⁸ Stadiums in the SEC can only hold 60-100,000 people; can the entire rest of the fanbase that doesn't get a seat be discredited? Bale's analysis of game-going fans is apt and useful, but those who do not attend should not be devalued in their contribution to a fanbase and therefore a fan region. It would be suspect to argue that those who attend a game are therefore better or stronger fans than those who are not in personal attendance because how can one quantify fandom? The involved nature of attending a game does take more than the casual fan to go through that process. However, socioeconomic status, distance away from a stadium, or any number of antidotal reasons here could play a part in another fan not being able to attend. Research neglecting these

¹⁰⁷ John Bale, *Sports Geography* 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2003), 118.

¹⁰⁸ C.C. Roseman & Fred M. Shelley, "The Geography of Collegiate Football Radio Broadcasting," *Sport Place* 2, no. 2 (1988): 43.

remote fans misses a whole piece of the puzzle and prevents an important part of a fanbase from being included in the fan region.

Bale concludes his book with a chapter concerning the “imaginative geographies of sport.”¹⁰⁹ Here, he examines concepts relating to “the strength of regional sports imagery” and “the degree of congruence between the sports images people have of places and the sporting reality.”¹¹⁰ For Bale, mental maps and imaginative geographies are important yet not concrete representations of the actual; perception is not reality. He also draws a sharp distinction between these two concepts. Mental maps are “psychological representations of places or regions” where people believe an area exists. He relates these to perceptual regions not unlike the vernacular regions defined by Reed, Zelinsky, and others mentioned earlier. Just as with the example map of fandom, the one of the vernacular regions of British sport shows the ability of regions to overlap. People’s ideas of where a sport is strong is influenced by many media but is still constructed by people. Imaginative geographies, however, “are more than perceptions” in that they are constructed and recorded by various types of media “including writing, photography, movies, and art.”¹¹¹ Examples of the words of the imaginative geography of the football South will be explored below.

While he does not expound greatly upon his points, Bale recognizes the importance of fandom as a component of sport and its resulting geography while Rooney focuses more on player production as the foundation for a definition of a sport’s geographic region. Fandom as a concept is important to understand because it is the basis of the SEC region defined in this work. Matt Hill discusses this in *Fan Cultures*. He

¹⁰⁹ John Bale, *Sports Geography* 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2003), 161.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 161.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 161 & 166.

writes about the fandoms centered on television, film, and literature instead of sports, but his ideas are very applicable and relatable to sports fandom.

Hill prefaces his work with a discussion about the tensions between fandom and academia. Those in either camp can work in opposition to the other by either the fan discrediting the academic as not a true fan for his or her inability to perform “‘good’ fan practices” or the academic studying the fan as something separate from himself or herself. This “mutual marginalization would suggest that fandom and academia are...exclusive...positions” and works to create the oppositional camp as an imagined other.¹¹² But Hill then turns to a type of hybrid notion that can be observed: fan-scholars and scholar-fans who work within their primary category (identified in the first word of the label) by borrowing techniques and motivations from the other. The catch with these hybrids, however, is that their “between-ness” fuels their marginalization; “fan-scholars nor scholar-fans can properly belong to [their respective primary communities or their] other, secondary community” either.¹¹³ This means that “scholar-fans are typically looked down on as not being proper academics, while fan-scholars are typically viewed within their fandoms as pretensions or not real fans.”¹¹⁴ This is important because of my position as an author and a fan. As a self-identified scholar-fan, I write with an acknowledgement of my position of personal connection to the SEC and its fandom and the challenges Hill points out about that position. In a way, I express my fandom here through my academic work and devotion to a scholarly study of an entity I connect to on a personal level.

Another useful part of Hill’s work comes from his discussion of fan geographies.

¹¹² Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

He relates more imagined spaces that texts present in their connection to real spatial locations. While the South is a perceptual region, it is still more solidly grounded than the textual places he writes about. However, there are parallels. He writes about the television show *The X-Files* and its fans' pilgrimages to Vancouver where the show takes place. This is analogous to Alabama fans traveling to Tuscaloosa on non-game days. Both are not able to interact with the focus of their fandom directly, but their experience with the place through media (be it the show or watching a game) makes the voyage special and significant to a fan. It is true also that "the confluence of cultural geographies and fan preoccupation" allows "certain locations [to become] shorthand for the cult geography in question."¹¹⁵ For example, Bryant-Denny Stadium and Tuscaloosa are used among media and fans to allude specifically to Alabama football.

Hill would most likely take issue with my likening of his example of Vancouver with mine of Tuscaloosa because of the overt commercialization of the fan's experience in my example. Certainly there are fans who travel to see the outside of the stadium, but even then, that fan may go to the campus bookstore to grab some crimson gear before heading out. The lack of commercialization of *The X-Files* in Vancouver is significant for Hill because the cult geography he speaks of is "best considered as a fan attachment to non-commodified space...so that the fan's experience of this space is not commercially constructed."¹¹⁶ Stadiums on game day are certainly anything from not commercialized. However, I do not see why a lack of commercialization intensifies one's fandom. In fact, commercialization can be a mark of a true football fan. The sale of a ticket means that a person gives up something of value for a direct experience with the team he or she is a fan of. The sale of merchandise is an exchange of a valuable in exchange for an item that

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 149.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 151.

brands a person or his or her car, house, or lawn to express fandom further. This is why it is valid to map expressions of fandom that are commercially connected to understand a fan region.

The anthology *Sports Fans, Identity, and Socialization: Exploring Fandemonium* is a direct attempt to connect the idea of fandom to sports. The editors begin the work by revising Karl Marx's statement to say that sports, not religion, is the opiate of the masses.¹¹⁷ Aden and Titsworth begin with a discussion on the fandom of Nebraska Cornhuskers, a known college football program with a loyal fanbase. The place and agrarian nature of the state of Nebraska is important to these fans and their connection to the football team in a similar way that SEC fans use the region of the South to connect to their larger conference. Gantz, Fingerhut, and Nardorff introduce the social aspect of sport by talking about the interactions between fans and conclude that sports are more fun to be experienced with other fans. Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, Visek, Partridge, and Lanter continue in this train of thought by saying it is fun because there is a level of trust between fans of a common team that help them connect. That trust leads to a collective team identity between the fans. This trust is quite relevant to the football fans at the center of this study. While the fans of the 14 SEC teams function under these parameters too, can the conference as a whole function this way? Is there a sense of trust and connection between fans of the SEC itself regardless of the specific team?

The grouping of fans together for collective support is often referred to as a team's fanbase. The fanbases of the SEC as we will see are particularly interested in ideas of heritage, tradition, and victory. These fanbases might be conceived of a community in

¹¹⁷ Adam C. Earnhardt, Paul M. Haridakis, & Barbara S. Hugenberg, eds, *Sports Fans, Identity, and Socialization: Exploring the Fandemonium* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), ix.

which its members are bound together in a common likeness. The idea of a community is more complicated than this however; Stephen Doheny-Farina argues that a true community is an evolving and dynamic “collective...in which the public and private lives of its members are moving toward interdependency regardless of” the members’ differences.¹¹⁸ However, he argues, this is not sustainable on a large scale. Instead, what emerges are “lifestyle enclaves” that describe parts of the members’ lives in terms of leisure and consumptive behaviors.¹¹⁹ Fans might seem to reflect this lifestyle enclave when they come together because sports fandom is both a leisure and consumptive behavior. There is also certainly a “narcissism of similarity” in that fans create an ingroup and outgroup with the outgroup as irrelevant and the ingroup as very important.¹²⁰ They provide a place for individuals in modernity who may lack a true community.

While Doheny-Farina suggests a strong separation between a true community and a lifestyle enclave, Benedict Anderson recognizes the possibility of an imagined community. His influential work that laid the groundwork for this concept was written in the context of the origin and development of nationalism, but the idea is applicable outside the nation. These communities are imagined because not every member can know everyone else, yet “in the minds of each live the image of their communion.”¹²¹ It is described as a community because there is conceived to be a “deep, horizontal comradeship” among the members.¹²² Anderson recognizes the significance of a group conceiving of themselves as a community that carries more weight than Doheny-Farina

¹¹⁸ Stephen Doheny-Farina, *The Wired Neighborhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 50.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 50.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 50.

¹²¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (New York: Verso, 2016), 6.

¹²² Ibid, 7.

would suggest.

The idea of imagination is vital to identity, especially to vernacular regions. Another important part of Anderson's imagined community idea is its limited nature because they have "finite, if elastic, boundaries."¹²³ This concept can indeed be seen through a vernacular region, and John Shelton Reed, Wilbur Zelinsky, and others try to make it more tangible by delineating regions' finite, elastic boundaries. Imagined communities are based on "limited imaginings" just as vernacular regions are "perceived to exist by its inhabitants."¹²⁴ These ideas of group membership and where those groups exist geographically all come from the mental constructs and mental maps of people that can have very real and tangible consequences.

Fanbases in actuality resemble a lifestyle enclave more than Doheny-Farina's idea of a true community. However, lifestyle enclaves "provide a sense of community," exactly what Anderson presents as an imagined community.¹²⁵ While they may not constitute deep and meaningful relationship-based communities, the "sense of community" brings them to life in the minds of the community's members.¹²⁶ These "limited imaginings" are often based on little tangible bases, just as regional identity can be based on little commonalities and stray from geographic truth. Fandom also is shallow to a certain extent in this regard because it lacks meaningful relationships beyond the leisure and consumptive activities. However, membership in these fanbases is widely imagined by SEC fans, and many hold their fandom as a "horizon of

¹²³ Ibid, 7.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 7.

Mona Domosh, Roderick P. Neumann, Patricia L. Price, and Terry G. Jordan, eds, *The Human Mosaic: A Cultural Approach to Human Geography* 11th ed. (New York: W.H. Freedman and Company, 2010), 10.

¹²⁵ Stephen Doheny-Farina, *The Wired Neighborhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 50.

¹²⁶ Ibid 50.

significance” that helps the fans think about themselves and their place in the world.¹²⁷ This conception of membership within the group and its perceived importance in the life of the individual fan leads to real world consequences when large quantities of people who are within the imagined community of fandom begin to spend vast sums of money and time exercising their fandom. Some examples of this will be explored in detail later.

Fanbases are imagined communities that are perceived to exist. They may not constitute the ideal or highest form of a community, but the perception of the masses that a community exists gives this popular notion power and makes the idea come to life. And in the SEC fanbase where membership in the community is somewhat geographically based, the limited nature of imagined communities becomes important as fixed, elastic boundaries emerge and vernacular regions are constructed. These imagined communities can have very real consequences once members buy into their importance and begin to make important personal and financial decisions as a result of their perceived membership.

Warren St. John gives a personal account of the type of fandom that is common in the SEC in his book *Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer: A Journey into the Heart of Sports Mania*. The author is an Alabama fan and writes about his experience following the RVs of the Crimson Tide around for a football season in a narrative anthropology. His anecdotes demonstrate the type of fanaticism typical in the SEC. He focuses on the University of Alabama as his case study because college football is so important to the fans of that team including himself. His work shows the embodiment of fan theories written about by academics in a crazed way of perfect game attendance, travel around the South by RV caravan, and unabashed dancing after a Crimson Tide championship

¹²⁷ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 39.

win. The ideas of trust and connection between fans and the importance of place for a fan coincide here to give a great ethnography on the phenomenon of SEC football.

With both discussions of how regionalism and fandom are constructed and relate to the powerful example of the SEC, it is important to look at the idea of a conference and how these other ideas connect to this organization of teams. I return now to Rooney's definition of an athletic conference, an entity that "conforms broadly to a traditional geographic region of the United States."¹²⁸ Both he and Bale discuss sports in connection to regionalism in many different ways, but they mention nothing more about these collegiate athletic conferences and their connection and conformation to the cultural regions of the United States. In fact, this has been a neglected area within the geography of college football; more research on individual teams or the nation as a whole has been done as opposed to looking at teams' organization into conferences.

Carl Abbott in 1990 however did examine this connection and wrote about how the formation and organization "of college conferences is [tied to] a sense of regional cultural identity."¹²⁹ His paper was written to examine the inter-regional and inter-conference rivalries, but his attempt to relate US regions and conferences is valuable. Abbot importantly argues that the schools that make up collegiate athletic conferences somehow fit into the group because of their geographical position in a region shared by all members in that conference. His examples include the Ivy League as a reflection of Gottman's Megalopolis region and the Pacific 10 as a reflection of Pomeroy's Pacific region, but he surprisingly leaves out the Southeastern Conference and its connection to the Deep South.

¹²⁸ John F. Rooney & Richard Pillsbury, *Atlas of American Sport* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1992), 63.

¹²⁹ Carl Abbot, "College Athletic Conferences and American Regions." *Journal of American Studies* 24, no. 2 (Aug, 1990): 211-212.

It is important to remember that in 1990 when Abbot published his work, the conference landscape was much different than it is today. Then, traditional conferences did match up to the US' cultural regions better. This is partly because they were smaller. The Big Ten was confined to the heart of the Corn Belt, the ACC included schools on the southern Atlantic coast, and the SEC included teams in the Deep South. At this article's time of publication, Arkansas and South Carolina were not in the SEC, Penn State was not yet a member of the Big Ten, and the Big XII Conference did not even exist. The notion of an athletic conference for many years in the twentieth century was a grouping and organization of regionally-based institutions of higher education for athletic competition.¹³⁰ However, John Rooney accurately predicted that "structural changes to align schools with television programming demands may soon become the rule rather than the exception."¹³¹

Conferences have always been fluid entities; the Southeastern Conference itself was founded in a time of realignment for the Southern Conference.¹³² The SEC has since parted ways with three schools: Sewanee, Tulane, and Georgia Tech. The conference's addition of Arkansas from the Southwest Conference and South Carolina from the ACC in 1992 foundationally changed college football in that it ushered in an era of a conference football championship game.¹³³ Yet while these changes were made, the regional cohesiveness of conferences remained intact. At the beginning of the Bowl Championship Series era in 1998, there were six premier conferences that could be

¹³⁰ John F. Rooney & Richard Pillsbury, *Atlas of American Sport* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1992), 44, 63.

¹³¹ *Ibid* 63.

¹³² Melvin Henry Gruensfelder, *A History of the Origin and Development of the Southeastern Conference* (Unpublished Master's Thesis: University of Illinois, 1964), 66, 86.

¹³³ Trevor Abbott, "The Bigger the Better? An Analysis on the Effect of Conference Size on NCAA Football Team and Conference Profit," (Unpublished Undergraduate Honors Thesis: University of California, Berkeley, 2012), 7.

attributed loosely to cultural regions of the United States: the ACC to the Southeast, the SEC to the Deep South, the Big 10 to the Midwest, the Big XII to the Great Plains, and the Pac 10 to the Pacific Coast.

The conference realignments of 2010 and 2012 fundamentally changed the notion of what an athletic conference was and what institutions were allowed where. The evolved landscape of conferences in modern-day collegiate athletics has necessitated school membership in a conference leaving independent play a dangerous option; even Notre Dame is more tied to a conference in football than ever before with its quasi-ACC membership. Conferences themselves have beefed up membership to numbers that were not thought of in 1990. Abbot's article is valuable in its direct attempt to connect conferences to regions, but he wrote about a much different layout of conferences.

The idea of a conference as an athletic entity worthy of study has been examined in many other different academic lights. Newman and Miller recognize the power of fandom among both teams and conferences when they explore the atmosphere surrounding college football games. They examine support for a team by studying "individuals who desire to see or hear the contest...who are willing to either pay or watch the contest."¹³⁴ This includes fans who are ticket holders, television watchers, and radio listeners; each is a mode of expressing support and interacting with one's fandom. Specifically, ticketholders are noted for their attendance despite the increased costs of attending games; a consumer market dedicated to the team will pay the high prices to participate in the gameday experience. They also cite geographical location as a possible gaining or "not gaining a great deal of local support."¹³⁵ Vanderbilt's location in an urban

¹³⁴ Richard E. Newman and Michael T. Miller, "Go Team, Rah, Rah, Rah! A Critical Examination of the Excitement of College Football Teams and Conferences" (Unpublished Paper: University of Arkansas, 2011), 2.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 9.

center in Nashville next to the Tennessee Titans may cut into their support. This may be why it is the only SEC team in the list of the 10 least exciting atmospheres in the nation. Five SEC teams made the top 10, and it as a conference was collectively found to be the most exciting in the country.

Mark Groza looks at the ways conference realignment affects gameday attendance. Importantly, he defines conferences as “alliances created to play common opponents and consolidate revenues,” but he does not recognize the entities as having any connection to regionalism or culture as Abbott and Rooney do. Groza published this work in 2010 well after Rooney and Abbott when most conferences were beginning to break with their regional ties. He notes that “recent on-field success and tradition are the two most important factors in attracting fans to football games” and that “distance between universities...would be negatively associated with visitor ticket sales.”¹³⁶ He reaches the conclusion that conference realignment does in fact increase attendance regardless of the current or traditional quality of the new teams due to the fresh intrigue it provides fans. Another interesting possible reason for increased attendance is the fact “that individual conferences themselves have a certain drawing power” that when better in quality offer more important games, larger TV contracts, and better bowl bids.¹³⁷ Because his report ranks the SEC as the top conference nationally in attendance, on-field performance, and bowl appearances, this would especially hold true for the SEC.

Conferences as organizational entities are important and have regional ties, but before the link between the SEC and the vernacular South, it’s important to acknowledge college football’s place within the region’s sporting scene. In *The New Encyclopedia of*

¹³⁶ Mark D. Groza, “NCAA Conference Realignment and Football Game Day Attendance.” *Managerial and Decision Economics* 31 (2010): 519.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 527.

Southern Culture, an entire volume is dedicated to sports and recreation because “Southerners [seem] inclined to seek out competition and turn everything they [can] into a contest.”¹³⁸ The introduction spends a good deal of time on college football’s cultural importance. It proclaims a common thread that many sources often use to connect these two ideas: “football became, for Dixie at least, another way to fight the Civil War to a different outcome.”¹³⁹ This resilience of the Southern competitive atmosphere frames all sport in the region including college football.

There is indeed “more to southern recreation and leisure than football:” hunting, fishing, NASCAR, baseball, basketball, and other activities also hold an important place in the lives of some southerners and “are as many and varied as the southerners themselves.”¹⁴⁰ While it still gives a nod to the importance of college football with several articles, the anthology, *The Sporting World of the Modern South*, includes articles of many different aspects of Southern organized competitive leisure such as baseball, basketball, wrestling and NASCAR. Pierce and Harvey look specifically at NASCAR and football in their article (that is not included in the anthology just mentioned) when discussing whether stock-car racing or collegiate pigskin is more important to the South. The two authors disagree with each other in the same article in which they both cite history, attendance, and fandom for why their sport is more popular in the region. It is important to remember that while college football, the SEC variety in particular, is important to a large number of Southerners, not everyone can be lumped into the category of football fanatic. There are many more sports that can occupy one’s time, and not all Southerners express fandom equally.

¹³⁸ Harvey H. Jackson III, ed, *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture; Volume 16: Sports and Recreation*, Charles Reagan Wilcon, vol. ed (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011) 9.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 12.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 14.

But through all of these sports, the majority consensus is that it is college football “more than any other sport [that] has a long and noteworthy place in the history of the South [and] seems to reflect cultural characteristics of the” region.¹⁴¹ The encyclopedia notes the success the region has had in the sport in national championships, legendary coaches, and Heisman Trophy winners that evoke a sense of pride among Southern football fans. It also references the unique and important traditions surrounding the games of Southern football teams that are treated as “an art form in the South” where the experiences “are something close to magical.”¹⁴² Through all of this, schools from the SEC are prominently featured as are some ACC schools such as Florida St, Clemson, Miami, and Georgia Tech that will need to be considered when discussing the SEC as the basis of a southern football vernacular region.

Another encyclopedic work that is more charged with regional pride than *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* is Tony Barnhart’s *Southern Fried Football*. Among its pages where it gives similar information to the other encyclopedia about famous coaches, esteemed players, important traditions, and on-the-field accomplishments can be found a vigorous rhetoric of the pride and distinction of Southern football. It is written in a combined style of factual encyclopedia material and Warren St. John’s unabashed pride and open support of the South’s collegiate football pastime. This is like the fan-academic position Hill referred to in *Fan Cultures*. Barnhart reiterates the notion of the Confederacy’s loss of the Civil War as a motivating factor for Southern teams on the gridiron to reverse the result of Appomattox.¹⁴³ The success of Southern teams fuels a strong support from fans that observe distinct traditions on gameday that

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 99 & 109.

¹⁴² Ibid, 109.

¹⁴³ Tony Barnhart, *Southern Fried Football: The History, Passion, and Glory of the Great Southern Game* (Chicago: Triumph Books, 2000), xii.

become cultural rituals.

Geographers L. Morgan and Ted Klimasewski recently published article on the geography of Southern football that takes a scholar-fan tone to examine the geographic dispersion of quality of SEC football play. The authors centrally argue a particular stance that “football has become a significant part of the Southern mind based upon merit” in the recent years since 2006, the University of Florida’s first national championship that began a streak of seven straight for the SEC and eight for the region. They then map out then the disparity of this success within the SEC based on a formula to determine the strength of each member institution and find that the conference’s “football power lies in the Heart of Dixie” rather than being pervasive throughout the region as a whole that extends to the peripheral areas of the region.¹⁴⁴

This article is important because the modern discussion of the spatial dimensions of the SEC is shown to be relevant in the larger conversation on the “cultural geography of the South [that] has depth that goes beyond being a phenomenon of popular culture.”¹⁴⁵ The author’s wording suggests an interesting assumption: while Florida State and other Southern ACC teams are mentioned and not discounted, the article often treats the label of “Southern” and “SEC” as synonymous. The majority of the calculations and mapping are concerned with the SEC and eventually delineates a “Pigskin Power Region,” a label that is an edited version of Rooney’s Pigskin Cult in his *Atlas of American Sport*, that is “composed of...SEC universities” to show the South’s regional dominance. More attention is given to the SEC Tide, Tigers (plural) and Gators than the ACC Seminoles despite all of them winning national championships since 2006. This

¹⁴⁴ Larry Joe Morgan and Ted Klimasewski, “Pigskin Power Region: Dominance of Southern Collegiate Football,” *Southeastern Geographer* 55, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 222.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 215.

not-so-unconscious phrasing soundly reflects the SEC's established place as the South's premier conference culturally, and the authors argue for it competitively.

While this article does indeed sufficiently acknowledge college football's place in Southern culture, it is written under the assumption that the "success of Southern football against the nation's collegiate football programs projects a regional personality of superiority," pride, and patriotism.¹⁴⁶ This understates the importance that SEC football has in Southern culture; certainly Southerners display more regional pride when their team wins, but the distinctive Southern passion for football is not dependent on the success of the region's teams. Winning elicits emotions of pride, but this is not the sole basis for Southern identity expressed through fandom.

The article also discusses the region of the South and shows a map of the SEC's footprint without comparing the two or considering the overlaps or disparities. The conference's footprint (defined by including all of each state in which an SEC institution is found) is displayed in the map of the Pigskin Power Region. The rhetoric of the South and SEC as synonymous in a geographic article seems to imply that they are also geographically identical. This is a major assumption that I will geographically explore later in great detail.

Morgan and Klimasewski along with many others demonstrate the Southeastern Conference's position within the cultural fabric of the South. Therefore, an understanding of SEC football will help to piece together the larger mosaic of Southern identity.

American Football was inherited and adapted from England. The game known in the modern United States as soccer took a turn in 1823 in which the deviation of Rugby

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 215

football developed in England in which carrying the ball was not only legal but an instrumental part of the game. This new game traveled across the Atlantic like soccer already had to the playing fields of America. Rugby began being played in the United States at universities (mostly Northern Ivy League institutions) after the Civil War, and the new “running game” of Rugby was clearly preferable among students over the kicking soccer game. However, the students “did not want to ...play Rugby according to the British rules” because of its heavy reliance on gentlemanly traditions instead of hashed out rules.¹⁴⁷ An effort was made to “fill in by formal procedures the vacuum of etiquette and...to adapt [Rugby] to its new cultural home” in the United States.¹⁴⁸ Through new rules created by the players themselves to erase ambiguity and other entities like the NCAA and even the US federal government (and President Teddy Roosevelt himself) to ensure the safety of players, changes like four downs, lines of scrimmage (from the rugby “scrum”), forward passes, and helmets and padding appeared on the gridiron.

American football was “developed in and for...student group[s]” on university campuses, so the origin of the game is synonymous with the origin of college football.¹⁴⁹ The fierce attitudes of an “interest in winning games” and display of a “competitive spirit” have always framed college football and have left its professional counterpart historically and “symbolically less important.”¹⁵⁰ This is especially true in the South where professional football is a recent development and where these values were internalized and intensified. Football came to the South at a time of reconstruction after

¹⁴⁷ David Riesman and Reuel Denney, “Football in America: A Study in Cultural Diffusion,” *American Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (Winter 1951): 313.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 315.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 318.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 320 & 311.

a defeat in the Civil War that changed the landscape of the region forever. Through this period, the region was subservient to the North in seemingly every way, chiefly politically, industrially, and economically. So, a region “lacking political power and social esteem...sought new ways to prove their superiority to Northerners.”¹⁵¹ College football filled this void in the 1920s and 30s as a means for “Southerners to rekindle their sense of honor.”¹⁵²

The first intercollegiate football contests occurred in the next decade following Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, but it took years for the sport to diffuse to the South. In 1892, “a student from Massachusetts originally introduced [football] to the Alabama campus.”¹⁵³ This Northern import of a game became popular quickly but took time to develop in quality in the South. Southern teams suffered from “woefully inadequate budget, tiny enrollments, and a two-decade head start...by their Northern counterparts” and served as easy practice wins on the schedules of teams from the North.¹⁵⁴ Despite the lack of success, Southern teams kept at it with a decisive vocabulary of antagonism against the North that was reminiscent of the Lost Cause. Wes Borucki rightly states that “analogies between football and the Civil War cannot be overdrawn” where the early days of the game in the South are concerned.¹⁵⁵ Teams would travel to be beaten by Northern teams but would describe the trips as “northern invasions” and would return “home to congratulations for having defended the honor and traditions of the South.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ Wes Borucki, “‘You’re Dixie’s Football Pride’: American College Football and the Resurgence of Southern Identity,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 10 (2003): 479.

¹⁵² Ibid, 479.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 479.

¹⁵⁴ Andrew Doyle, “Turning the Tide: College Football and Southern Progressivism,” *Southern Cultures* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 29.

¹⁵⁵ Wes Borucki, “‘You’re Dixie’s Football Pride’: American College Football and the Resurgence of Southern Identity,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 10 (2003): 480.

¹⁵⁶ Andrew Doyle, “Turning the Tide: College Football and Southern Progressivism,” *Southern Cultures* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 29.

This “ethic of Southern honor that was born before the American Civil War” was easily transferred “to the warlike arena of the football field [where] Southerners looked to the sport as a source of pride where feelings of defeat were still strong.”¹⁵⁷

Then something happened. In 1962, the Alabama Crimson Tide won the Rose Bowl. This monumental victory changed Southern football forever. The Crimson Tide “became the first Southern team to win intersectional games versus powerful Northern and Western teams” and gave the region its first taste of college football success.¹⁵⁸ Alabama’s appearance in the game was astounding considering the region’s poor reputation, and the victory over Washington proved to be even bigger of a surprise. During that game in Pasadena and in the years that followed, the important idea was born: “The Crimson Tide no longer belongs exclusively to Tuscaloosa and the state of Alabama. It belongs to the whole South.”¹⁵⁹ The team became the leading source of regional pride through its victories. People declared it “the greatest victory for the South since the first battle of Bull Run,” and a deep cultural connection between college football and regionalism was established.¹⁶⁰

Rhetoric connecting Southern football and the Civil War resurfaces again and again in academic literature, but it also seeps into college athletics more directly in the form of teams’ nicknames and mascots. Megan Bever writes about the existence of mascots tied to the Civil War and the divide between what is acceptable and what is not. She discusses the mascots of the universities of Kansas (Big XII), Missouri (then Big XII,

¹⁵⁷ Wes Borucki, “‘You’re Dixie’s Football Pride’: American College Football and the Resurgence of Southern Identity,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 10 (2003): 478.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 479.

¹⁵⁹ Andrew Doyle, “Turning the Tide: College Football and Southern Progressivism,” *Southern Cultures* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 37-38.

¹⁶⁰ Andrew Doyle, “Turning the Tide: College Football and Southern Progressivism,” *Southern Cultures* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 37.

now SEC), and Mississippi (SEC), “all three of which owe their origins to the Civil War.”¹⁶¹ Mississippi, called “Ole Miss” because of the “term slaves often used...to refer to their mistresses,” has obvious ties to the Confederacy because of its nickname “Rebels” and former mascot Colonel Reb, “both a Confederate soldier and a Southern slaveholding planter.”¹⁶² Kansas’ Jayhawks nickname came from guerilla fighters fighting for a free Kansas during the Civil War with strong Union ties. Missouri, a “Midwestern university” according to Bever, connects its Tiger nickname back to the Columbia Tigers, a group of “students and townspeople... [who] were Confederate sympathizers” who worked in 1864 to keep the city and the campus of the university secure from guerrilla attacks.¹⁶³ Columbia was in the Little Dixie region where “the majority of the inhabitants were pro-southern” during the Civil War.¹⁶⁴ While Missouri did not succeed to join Mississippi in the Confederacy, it is interesting to consider the state’s flagship university that bears a Confederate-leaning nickname that has since the time of the publication of Bever’s article moved to join Mississippi in the SEC.

During the rise of the prestige of Southern college football, governing organizations to oversee the new sport of college football developed. The National Collegiate Athletic Association was created as a nation-wide governing body to begin the regulation of intercollegiate athletics, and the “joining together of neighboring institutions of like concern into athletic conferences” proved to be another way to further govern the sport.¹⁶⁵ Melvin Henry Gruensfelder compiled the first *History of the Origin*

¹⁶¹ Megan L. Bever, “Fuzzy Memories: College Mascots and the Struggle to Find Appropriate Legacies of the Civil War.” *Journal of Sport History* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 447.

¹⁶² Ibid, 448 & 451.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 451.

¹⁶⁴ Robert M. Crisler, “Missouri’s ‘Little Dixie,’” *Missouri Historical Review* 52, no. 2 (January 1948), 131.

¹⁶⁵ Melvin Henry Gruensfelder, *A History of the Origin and Development of the Southeastern Conference* (Unpublished Master’s Thesis: University of Illinois, 1964), 1.

and Development of the Southeastern Conference in 1964 to give insight into the beginnings of the conference framed by national and regional context of the time in question along with details on the organization of the conference in its stages of development.

The first attempt at an organized Southern athletic conference came after similar organizations rose in other areas of the country. The modern-day versions of the Big Ten (Midwest), Big Twelve (Great Plains-split between the Southwest Conference and Missouri Valley Conference), and Pacific Twelve were all formed before the South organized in similar fashion.¹⁶⁶ Southern institutions attempted to follow suit and regulate intercollegiate athletics as early as 1894 when the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association (SIAA) was formed by colleges and universities stretching from Texas to Virginia to extend the ideals of fair competition and centralized administration “into all regions of the South.”¹⁶⁷ The SIAA, like so many of the conferences in the early days of college football, was regionally based. There was no unification based on size or type of school; it was a union of schools with one factor in common: regional geography. These 19 schools’ “wide geographical dispersion and great diversity of purpose made uniform agreement increasingly difficult” until eight of the schools (six present-day SEC schools and two future ACC schools) met in Atlanta and succeeded and joined with six other non-SIAA Southern-Atlantic schools to form the Southern Conference (SoCon) in 1921. Within two years, membership was beefed up to 22 institutions with members that consisted of many present-day ACC and SEC schools. The SEC and ACC as they were at the turn of the twenty-first century were in fact at one time geographically organized

¹⁶⁶ Carl Abbot, “College Athletic Conferences and American Regions.” *Journal of American Studies* 24, no. 2 (Aug. 1990): 211.

¹⁶⁷ Melvin Henry Gruensfelder, *A History of the Origin and Development of the Southeastern Conference* (Unpublished Master’s Thesis: University of Illinois, 1964), 9.

into one Southern Conference.

However, this was not to last. Alabama's trip to the Rose Bowl in 1926 was the biggest "event in the football history of the [Southern] Conference" and changed the perspective of some institutions. Disagreements between schools over rules and regulations of scholarship allocation and whether freshmen should be allowed to play came to a head between larger and smaller schools of the SoCon. So, in the midst of the depression, the 22 schools met in Knoxville met to resolve their differences. Instead, "the old differences still existed to prevent further cooperative action" and an "agreement was reached as to a division which was affected regionally, along geographical lines."¹⁶⁸ Ten schools east of the Appalachian Mountains remained in the SoCon under all of its rules and regulations, and thirteen schools in the "Central and Western regions [of the South] assumed a new organization and a new name- The Southeastern Conference" (SEC).¹⁶⁹ Professor Sanford for which the University of Georgia's stadium is named reported to the NCAA on this split by saying that while the issues that prevailed at the Knoxville meeting were between large and small schools, he was happy to report that "the division [was] made on solely geographical lines" as to not offend anyone.¹⁷⁰ The SoCon rebounded within its smaller region and expanded until "it again suffered a separation in 1953" in which the ACC was born.¹⁷¹ It is important to note that the SEC was born as a conference exclusively based on geography; it was a grouping of schools in the Deep South with their region as the glue to bind them. Gruensfelder is of the opinion that the South was split by this break, and "the grand period of region-wide extension of ideals [of] athletic regulation and control that began in 1894 (with the

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 66.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 66.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 66.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 67.

SIAA) was ended.”¹⁷² However, the South that was split then was the South written about by Odum and Vance; much has changed in the region and in the conference since then.

The Southeastern Conference was born in 1933 with 13 charter members, 10 of which still compete in the SEC: Alabama, Auburn, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, LSU, Mississippi State, Ole Miss, Tennessee, and Vanderbilt with the three others being Georgia Tech, Sewanee, and Tulane. Fearful of similar problems experienced by a much larger SoCon, the SEC capped its membership at 13 schools. In 1940, Sewanee, the University of the South, withdrew from the SEC to deemphasize athletics, and Georgia Tech followed in 1964 at the time of Gruensfelder’s publication to pursue independent play before joining the ACC more than a decade later.¹⁷³ Gruensfelder pines for the loss of the Yellow Jackets, a school devoted to more sports than just football that brought a well-rounded approach to the SEC. Tulane withdrew from the SEC two years after his writing in 1966 to leave SEC membership at 10 for the next quarter of a century with the same state-wide footprint it had when it was formed. While the SEC considered adding Miami and Houston to replace these schools, nothing ever came of it.¹⁷⁴

It is impossible to talk about the SEC in the 1960s without acknowledging the larger historical context of the Civil Rights Movement. Integration of the SEC was slow to come after the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* trial: The first SEC football team to integrate was the University of Kentucky over a decade later in 1967 followed by Tennessee the next year.¹⁷⁵ It was the “last major intercollegiate conference in the United States to integrate its sports teams.”¹⁷⁶ The color barrier fell for the rest of the schools in

¹⁷² Ibid, 66.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 309.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 309.

¹⁷⁵ Joan Paul, Richard V. McGhee, and Helen Fant, “The Arrival and Ascendance of Black Athletes in the Southeastern Conference, 1966-1980,” *Phylon* (1960-) 45, no. 4 (4th Qtr. 1984): 284 & 287.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 284.

1970-72.¹⁷⁷

The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education Foundation reports that the quality of play by SEC schools that observed “an unwritten rule that blacks could not play football for any team in the” conference fell while other integrated teams improved.¹⁷⁸ A chief figure for this change was Paul “Bear” Bryant, Alabama’s most legendary coach after an all-white Crimson Tide team was decimated by an integrated University of Southern California team at home. Bear Bryant supposedly remarked years after the loss and integration in Tuscaloosa that the black player from USC who excelled in that game, “Sam Cunningham, did more for integration in Alabama in 60 minutes than Martin Luther King Jr. did in 20 years.”¹⁷⁹ Football historian Michael Oriard quibbles with this “myth of football’s integration in the Deep South that persists despite regular debunking” because it “distorts the integration of the Southeastern Conference by oversimplifying a far messier history.”¹⁸⁰ Each sport of each SEC school had to be integrated individually, and that was not completed until the 1979-80 seasons for sports outside of football.¹⁸¹ And even when “full integration” was achieved in 1972 for football, only 5.8% of SEC football players were black; involvement and inclusion had to grow from its measly starting point.¹⁸²

The white South’s reluctance to integrate is well-documented; the SEC’s comparative tardy integration when compared to other conferences reflects this

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 287.

¹⁷⁸ “Recalling the Death of Racial Segregation in Southern College Football,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* no. 21 (Autumn, 1998): 64.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 65.

¹⁸⁰ Michael Oriard, *Bowled Over: Big-Time College Football from the Sixties to the BCS Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 60 & 63.

¹⁸¹ Joan Paul, Richard V. McGhee, and Helen Fant, “The Arrival and Ascendance of Black Athletes in the Southeastern Conference, 1966-1980,” *Phylon* (1960-) 45, no. 4 (4th Qtr. 1984): 287.

¹⁸² Ibid, 290.

reluctance. The important point to glean from this discussion is the symbolic role of the SEC within the integration of the South and the diction of scholars to use the conference and the region interchangeably. Again, it is not the ACC nor the Southwest Conference that epitomize and reflect the region of the South but rather the SEC. This is not to take away from the earlier, more progressive integration of those two conferences but rather another way of pointing out the SEC as a staple of Southern culture through the positive points of modern pride and tradition and the messier past of discrimination and exclusion. Through it all, the SEC has been the conference of the South.

The SEC expanded again in 1992 when it added former ACC member University of South Carolina and former member of the Southwest Conference University of Arkansas. South Carolina left Clemson and other Carolina schools to expand the SEC eastward, and Arkansas left its Texas rivals to expand the SEC in the opposite direction to join teams that it had never been associated with before in the same conference. This move boosted membership back up to 12 teams and made the more regionally-inclusive conference eligible for a two-division football system and therefore a conference championship game. Commissioner Roy Kramer used the conference's expansion to bolster the SEC to become the first conference in the nation to hold a championship game.¹⁸³ The fabulous success of this system in its pilot year "started a trend towards twelve or more teams around the country."¹⁸⁴

Conferences nation-wide ballooned in the next two decades after the SEC expanded for the first time to create the modern landscape of college football. These

¹⁸³ ESPN Films, "The Play that Changed College Football," Season 1, Episode 13 (December 2011), Television.

¹⁸⁴ Trevor Abbott, "The Bigger the Better? An Analysis on the Effect of Conference Size on NCAA Football Team and Conference Profit," (Unpublished Undergraduate Honors Thesis: University of California, Berkeley, 2012), 7.

organizations that used to be based on regional geography are now bound together by important revenue-generating media such as “television, [an] important investment” into the markets of colleges where football is concerned.¹⁸⁵ The conferences Carl Abbott wrote about in 1990 that were formed based on “the ease of travel” for member institutions and “a sense of regional cultural identity” are mostly gone.¹⁸⁶ The Big Twelve, a conference traditionally formed from the Great Plains schools, now includes West Virginia. The Pacific 12 now includes Colorado. The Atlantic Coast Conference includes Louisville and has a reach from Miami to Boston. The Big Ten hardly reflects its old Midwestern Corn Belt roots anymore as it extends from Nebraska to New York City. The Southeastern Conference is the only one of the current “Power Five” conferences to hold a sense of regional identity and cohesiveness through the 2010-12 expansion. While the SEC was also motivated by capital and media gain like the other four conferences, it also choose to keep regionalism and culture a factor in its expansion decisions. The conference settled on adding Texas A&M and Missouri in 2012 from the Big 12 to extend the conference’s footprint once again into new territory.¹⁸⁷

R. Bowen Loftin, former administrator of both Texas A&M and Missouri in the 2010s, wrote a memoir about how Texas A&M entered into its marriage with the SEC: *The 100 Year Decision*. He casually but honestly discusses how the decision for A&M to move to the SEC transpired and why he feels that while the move was a complicated one that both A&M and Missouri “are significantly better off in the SEC than they ever were

¹⁸⁵ C.C. Roseman & Fred M. Shelley, “The Geography of Collegiate Football Radio Broadcasting,” *Sport Place* 2, no. 2 (1988): 44.

¹⁸⁶ Carl Abbot, “College Athletic Conferences and American Regions.” *Journal of American Studies* 24, no. 2 (Aug. 1990): 211-212.

¹⁸⁷ R. Bowen Loftin and Rusty Burson, *The 100 Year Decision: Texas A&M and the SEC* (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2014), 2-3.

or could have been in the Big 12.”¹⁸⁸ Among different financial, media, and anti-Texas motivations, Loftin continually recognizes the role that culture played in A&M’s move to the SEC. He and many Aggie administrators believe that “Texas A&M has always been an SEC school in terms of [its] traditions, spirit, and passion.”¹⁸⁹ A&M was presented to existing SEC fans as that “perfect cultural fit in” the conference, and these fans quickly “began to embrace the Aggies as a perfect addition in their league. At the same time, the A&M community went absolutely crazy with ‘SEC fever’” and took exceptionally well to the move to the southern conference.¹⁹⁰ This presentation of Texas A&M as a cultural fit within the SEC will be critically examined geographically with all of the overarching vernacular works of this project including special attention to works of Terry Jordan and D.W. Meinig on the state. While a fabulous memoir of Mizzou’s conference realignment does not yet exist, a similar analysis will be performed on the state of Missouri.

The rhetoric of modern academic and popular literature alike concerning the SEC continue to reinforce and hold true the importance of SEC football in Southern culture and validate the SEC as the South’s athletic conference. Academically, Vaughn May continues the tradition of John Rooney in looking at player production with a Southern twist. In his article subtitled “College Football Recruiting and the Oppositional South,” he names the Southeastern Conference as the “region’s premiere football league.”¹⁹¹ He does not do this blindly; he acknowledges that “several prominent southern football teams lie outside the Southeastern Conference,” but it is “the SEC that has been most closely identified with the regional mores and cultural dynamics of the south.”¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 3.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 120.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 156-157.

¹⁹¹ Vaughn May, “‘Planes Don’t Fly North’: College Football Recruiting and the Oppositional South,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 49.

¹⁹² Ibid, 65.

Harold McConnell expands on the themes of Rooney and May through his article on the geographic supply, demand, and migration of players in the South. McConnell saw the production of players as a regional dichotomy of “the South versus the rest of the country.”¹⁹³ He included the ACC (predominately Southern at the time), Southwest Conference of Texas and Arkansas, and SEC. In his look at the South he considered to extend from Maryland to Texas, he claims that “college football is an integral part of the Southern tradition.”¹⁹⁴ He supports this by an impressive collection of data from which he concludes that “the South produced major college football players at a rate considerably larger than the country as a whole” in the study period of 1981. While he did not focus on the SEC exclusively, he found that it and the Southwest Conference were “virtually self-sufficient” in player production and recruitment whereas the ACC schools (excluding South Carolina which is now a SEC school) were “heavily dependent on migration of players from the South Central and Northeast,” SEC and Ivy League territory respectively.¹⁹⁵

Vaughn May does not perform quantitative or geographic analyses anywhere close to the extent that McConnell does, but he echoes and strengthens the regional dichotomy rhetoric. He explores the notion that “there is something distinctive about...football” as a “cultural maker and a source of regional pride for the American South.”¹⁹⁶ He agrees with Morgan and Klimasewski that an “athletic superiority narrative” of the SEC “offers a basis of keen regional pride” and works to create the

¹⁹³ Harold McConnell, “Southern Major College Football: Supply, Demand, and Migration of Players,” *Southeastern Geographer* 23, no. 2 (November 1983): 78.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 104.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 105.

¹⁹⁶ Vaughn May, “‘Planes Don’t Fly North’: College Football Recruiting and the Oppositional South,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 49.

South as a region oppositional to the rest of the nation.¹⁹⁷ This oppositional South is seen in many ways including its economic opportunities and political discourse; football is a reflection of this “literal and symbolic opposition to the rest of the nation.”¹⁹⁸

May also addresses a point of SEC football often used by extra-regional critics to react against the rampant fandom of SEC supporters: the conference’s perceived moral inferiority. The SEC as a conference “ranks near the top of the heap” in NCAA infractions. This leaves one to wonder whether the premise of the connection of the SEC and Southern culture is the “propensity to cheat...endemic to southern culture.”¹⁹⁹ Heated popular debate exists on this especially between fans of the SEC and Big Ten on social media where everyone can have a voice. Regardless, the South continues to “tenaciously...define its flagship conference as superior to the rest of college football” to where “it remains an ‘oppositional South.’”²⁰⁰

Paul Finebaum is one figure of popular culture who weighed in on the issue of the morality of the SEC vs the Big Ten. Vaughn May describes him as a “talk radio show [host] who claim[s] that the SEC simply plays better football than the rest of the country.” Finebaum’s recent publication, *My Conference Can Beat Your Conference*, confirms this. In this popular book, Finebaum brings together what all the academics have said about the SEC with a heavy coloring of fandom. This book has it all: connections to the Civil War, unabashed regionalism, and a death grip on the fact that the SEC is the best conference in college football. The rabid fan and highly-respected professional acknowledges in his SEC manifesto a major point of this work here: “The

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 50.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 54.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 59.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 64.

SEC...makes us Southerners proud again. It helps define us. It makes us a family.”²⁰¹

Ray Glier, another journalist, writes on the SEC’s position in the modern landscape of college football. He gives a good detailed account of “the Streak,” the period of seven straight national championships won by the SEC from 2006-2012. Glier wrote after LSU and Alabama reached in the 2011 national championship game for an all-SEC contest for the national crown. Echoes of Vaughn May’s oppositional South discussion can be heard in Glier’s words when he writes that “the zeal and competitiveness in the South is why college football is thick with the acrimony, SEC vs. Everyone Else. The other conferences cannot match the fervor for football in the South.”²⁰² He heavily connects the history and Southern football by stating that “the dominance of the SEC has a lot more to do with the South’s culture than just...football played one day a week. The South lost the Civil War, and...there is still a regional angst and an ‘us against them’” spirit.²⁰³ He cites Doyle and Gruensfelder for a more researched and more historical version of Finebaum’s work that repeats the same narrative: the SEC does the best on the field and in the stands.

Yet another piece of popular SEC literature is a cookbook. How on earth is a cookbook helpful in understanding the South and football? It will because it is *Southern Living: The Official SEC Tailgating Cookbook*.²⁰⁴ When considering the prominence of the magazine and its place in the cultural landscape of the South as defined by Lauder, it is very telling that a media authority on Southern culture chose the SEC, not Southern

²⁰¹ Paul Finebaum and Gene Wojciechowski, *My Conference Can Beat Your Conference: Why the SEC Still Rules College Football* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 12.

²⁰² Ray Glier, *How the SEC Became Goliath: The Making of College Football’s Most Dominant Conference* (New York: Howard Books, 2012), 7.

²⁰³ Ibid, 9.

²⁰⁴ *Southern Living: The Official SEC Tailgating Cookbook* (New York: Time Home Entertainment Inc, 2012).

football in general, to market its product and use to construct culture. Similar verbiage on the SEC's importance in culture to other sources above is used, but it ties several aspects of Southern culture together: the magazine itself, food such as sweet tea, collards, and barbecue, ideas of the importance of family and hosting, and of course, SEC football.

Before turning to my primary work, I want to note some important pieces that have set a framework that I generously borrow from. In an unpublished master's thesis, Orion Stand-Gravois geographically examined the fanbase of one SEC football team, Auburn.²⁰⁵ He uses many of the same qualities that I have chosen to examine in determining fan regions of college football teams: season ticket holders' locations, location of booster clubs of the annual fund, location of Auburn radio network affiliates who broadcast football games, residential location of current students and alumni of Auburn, and Google search frequencies. I use most of these factors in defining the larger SEC region with a few twists. Stand-Gravois used residential addresses, while I use less exact zip code data for more consistent numbers that come from all schools that officials would be willing to donate to me more. He uses booster club locations, but because of the inconsistencies found between the 14 schools in annual fund organization, I chose to examine this with zip code data as well. I also could not get residential zip code data from alumni associations; I will only look at their alumni clubs as this will be the best measure of alumni locations. Regardless of the differences, however, Stand-Gravois' work was an inspiration to make the larger conference picture come together.

Stand-Gravois cites two works that I also use that should be noted. One is an article by Blake Gumprecht that discusses the stadium culture of college towns in

²⁰⁵ Orion Michael Stand-Gravois, "A Geographical Investigation of Football and its Fans at Auburn University," (Unpublished Master's Thesis: Auburn University, 2012).

America and the effect of football on the locations. This is important to consider when discussing gameday, tailgating, and the pilgrimage to the stadium that Bale discusses.²⁰⁶

Another work is an instrumental one for my analysis of the SEC as a region: Roseman and Shelley's article on "The Geography of Collegiate Football Radio Broadcasting." This article looks at the "experience of college football in places away from the stadium."²⁰⁷ Radio is seen as an important way of broadcasting a brand that in turn helps with the sale of tickets and fund raising from donor, other important elements of a fanbase. Radio is examined instead of television because while both help remote fans connect to a team, "the radio audience is generally more reflective of true fan support for a particular team than the television audience." Roseman and Shelley looked at a wide variety of schools, not just ones from prominent conferences. They examined different spatial distributions of radio affiliates across the United States for many different teams and concluded different types of fanbases based on these distributions. They noticed the important part that state lines play in the delineation of these regions which is important to remember when looking at the vernacular region of the SEC.²⁰⁸

A few works are important to mention for their methodology. In his cultural study of the Upland South, Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov examined "artifacts" that "collectively...reveal the Upland South as a distinctive culture and way of life."²⁰⁹ This regional revelation was cartographically constructed through a geographical index of five

²⁰⁶ Blake Gumprecht, "Stadium Culture: College Athletics and the Making of Place in the American College Town," *Southeastern Geographer* 43, no. 1 (May 2003): 28-53.

²⁰⁷ C.C. Roseman & Fred M. Shelley, "The Geography of Collegiate Football Radio Broadcasting," *Sport Place* 2, no. 2 (1988): 43.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁰⁹ Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov, *The Upland South: The Making of an American Folk Region and Landscape* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Center for American Places Inc, 2003), 81.

artifacts of Upland Southern-ness at the county level. In order for it to be considered part of the region, each county had to reach the threshold of two or more out of the five artifacts. This is a useful method of analyzing multiple attributes in order to delineate a region. The present study will utilize a similar spatial algebraic method to synthesize attributes of fandom into a geographic index. However, while Jordan-Bychkov studied a discontinuous region, the SEC fan region will be examined for continuity.

Additionally, while Jordan-Bychkov used county polygons to assess the Upland South, this study will not utilize those boundaries to assess fandom. Some data fit naturally into administrative regions at either the state or zip-code level. Other data exist in point form. Ate Poorthuis and Matthew Zook are modern GIS-users who are concerned with effective digital cartography. Point data, they explain, can lead to a problem of overplotting to where the number of points at any given space cannot be read. To alleviate this problem, they suggest “a more suitable approach [:] aggregate individual points to larger areas or polygons.”²¹⁰ These polygons could be the counties that Jordan-Bychkov used, but Poorthuis and Zook recommend “arbitrary spatial areas, such as rectangles” because unlike administrative units, in “a regular lattice of rectangles,...every area has the exact same size.”²¹¹ Therefore, this method of analyzing spatial point data is used for the present analysis when applicable.

²¹⁰ Poorthuis and Matthew Zook, “Small Stories in Big Data: Gaining Insights from Large Spatial Point Pattern Datasets” in *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research* 17, no. 1 (2015), 154.

²¹¹ Ibid 154.

Data and Methods

Challenging the Notion of “The Footprint”

During the conference realignments of 2010 and 2012, there was a good deal of popular discussion about the effects of the various moves on each of the conferences involved. The discussion often revolved around how each of the programs would add to the overall on-field strength of the conference and how the television markets would be affected financially for each institution. There was a geographical discussion as well. The conversation did not so much bemoan or question the loss of the athletic conferences’ statuses as reflections of US culture regions as it did discuss how the conference’s footprint would be affected. A team’s footprint in college football is essentially the state in which it exists; a conference’s footprint therefore aggregates all of the states where its institutions are located. For example, the fourteen member institutions of the current Southeastern Conference are situated within eleven states. These states simply make up the SEC footprint.²¹²

The popular understanding of the geographic reach of a conference is synonymous with its footprint. *Sporting News*’ article on the 2012 conference realignment included a section for each of the conferences that were each illustrated with a map displaying each conference’s new footprint. In discussing the SEC’s moves to add Texas A&M and Missouri, it describes the state of Texas as a “lucrative...television market and elite recruiting territory”; the state of Missouri also helps to “expand the SEC footprint.”²¹³ A critical goal of the present study is to question whether a team and a conference’s so-called “territory” is truly reflective of its footprint. How important are state borders in bounding SEC fandom?

²¹² Appendix 1.

²¹³ *Sporting News* (January 2012), 36.

The idea of the footprint is perpetuated in part to the nature of collegiate recruiting. In-state recruiting is assumed to be the norm even in today's increasingly globalized world. This idea has some grounding as McConnell found that "on the whole, the rosters [of college football teams] indicate that the players tend to stay at home: 56.5 percent matriculated at colleges in their home states."²¹⁴ There is also an assumption as evidenced by the *Sporting News* quote mentioned above that the conference's footprint adds recruiting territory for the entire conference. This can be seen somewhat in McConnell's map of SEC recruiting in 1983, but his ACC map did not reflect that conference's footprint at the time.²¹⁵ While research only partially supports the idea of a recruiting-based footprint notion, the fact that the idea of a team's territory as equivalent to its state is prevalent in the minds of fans and sports media is powerful if we are to take seriously vernacular regions. Regardless of its actuality, if people believe in a connection between fandom, on-field performance, economic activity, and recruiting by a state's team and an idea of belonging to or ownership over the state itself, then that vernacular idea has some legitimacy. If football fans construct their mental maps of SEC territory to be the eleven states where SEC schools exist, that footprint has to be taken seriously and considered carefully when trying to delineate a fan region.

There are, however flaws when using recruiting areas to wholly describe a team's territory because it leaves out measures of that team's fanbase. Literature continually links the tradition of football in the South to Southern institutions' abilities to recruit good talent, but the modern tradition surrounding Southeastern Conference football would be vastly different without its infamous fandom.²¹⁶ No doubt this relationship

²¹⁴ Harold McConnell, "Southern Major College Football: Supply, Demand, and Migration of Players," *Southeastern Geographer* 23, no. 2 (November 1983): 94.

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, 98.

²¹⁶ John F. Rooney, "Up from the Mines and Out from the Parries: Some Geographical Implications of

between player production and fandom is cyclical: fans are energized with “football fever” stemming from “high-quality play” from their favorite team on the field.²¹⁷ Fans’ support of the team is strengthened alongside a rise in the team’s athletic standing. 18-year-old high school recruits looking for a collegiate home who is aware of the excitement surrounding the program in question sees its success on the field and joins the team. Friends surrounding this young man may either start or continue to buy merchandise with the school’s logo, attend games, and follow the team through media when they are away from the stadium.

This hypothesis has not been geographically explored before, but it will be here. Because of literature’s continual focus on player production and its potential cyclical connection to fandom, it will be included in the overall analysis of delineating the SEC fan region. It will be included alongside many different attributes of fandom, and GIS technologies will allow for a direct comparison of player production to these different attributes.

Attributes of Fandom

This study seeks to geographically examine the very complicated notion of fandom in several ways. These measures are derived from experiences either at or away from the “spectate,” which here refers to the fourteen stadiums around the Southeastern Conference. College football teams play no more than 15 games per year; SEC fandom is a strong expression of Southern identity because the interaction between people and sport persists for more than 15 days out of the year in places away from the spectate. The

Football in the United States,” *Geographical Review* 59, no. 4 (October, 1969): 491.

Harold McConnell, “Southern Major College Football: Supply, Demand, and Migration of Players,” *Southeastern Geographer* 23, no. 2 (November 1983): 104.

²¹⁷ John F. Rooney, “Up from the Mines and Out from the Parries: Some Geographical Implications of Football in the United States,” *Geographical Review* 59, no. 4 (October, 1969): 491.

present study looks at a variety of attributes of fandom that can be spatially examined to determine the extent of a fan region. The locations of ticket holders, donors to the athletic departments, radio station affiliates that broadcast football games, social media and internet activity, university alumni associations, purchases from university bookstores, states that offer SEC vanity license plates, and player production are all examined here in order to view SEC fandom from many different angles.

Tickets and Donations

Tickets

An obvious display of one's fandom is the fan's direct interaction with a team by their participation in a game by attending the sporting event. It is reasonable to assume that those people who purchase tickets and attend an SEC football game are fans of one team playing. The nature of the home-and-away schedule utilized by the SEC means that most teams in the conference see about eight home games a year. In a given crowd, most fans attending the game are there to support the home team. There are two types of tickets that can be purchased for SEC football games: single game tickets and season tickets. The former is one purchased for the buyer attend a specific, single game, while season tickets allow the buyer to attend every home game played in that season. The residential locations of each of these buyers can be examined therefore to see where fans are traveling from to the fourteen campuses across the SEC to see football games for themselves. By mapping ticket buyers, a certain attribute of SEC football fandom can be spatially analyzed.

Donations

An additional related display of one's fandom is the fan's financial contribution to an athletic department in the forms of donations to an annual fund. Annual funds are departments set up by universities to generate funding for athletic endeavors such as

capital building projects or the funding of athletic scholarships. These departments can operate as a direct branch of the university's athletic department as the Bulldog Club of Mississippi St. does, or it can operate as a private non-profit entity that works on its own to benefit the athletic department separately as the Gator Boosters do for the University of Florida. These organizations all exist to separate the athletic departments financially from the rest of the university. This is especially significant in public universities because it allows for public athletic departments to exist independently from public funding. Funds are raised by these offices completely by the solicitation of gifts and donations from individuals. These individuals give a certain amount of money to the annual fund and in return are compensated with the opportunity to additionally buy season tickets to football and basketball games.

In a similar line of thinking to those fans who purchase tickets, it is reasonable to assume that people who donate to an SEC annual fund are fans of the team that benefits from their contributions. The threshold for donations can be quite high; for example, the highest level in the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation that one could give towards is \$25,000 annually to become a "legend;" this would give the donor access to every benefit available to donors and the maximum eligibility for purchasing home, away, and bowl game tickets all at additional costs. This is a significant sum of money to be giving in support of a program. Lee et al. would suggest that this expenditure of money might be indicative of consumer values that in this case would tie to fandom. Donations are a lucrative expression of fandom.²¹⁸ The large sums of money given by the donor combined with his or her then purchasing of season tickets to then go a be a part of the

²¹⁸ Donghun Lee, Galen T. Trail, Hyungil H. Kwon, and Dean F. Anderson. "Consumer Values Versus Perceived Product Attributes: Relationships among Items from the MVS, PRS, and PERVAL Scales." *Sport Management Review* 14, no. 1 (2011).

game-day experience shows this twofold because it allows the donor to be a fan in two ways both at and away from the spectate. Therefore, the residential locations of each of these donors can be mapped to spatially analyze a lucrative attribute of SEC football fandom.

Data and Methods

Data concerning the residential locations of college football ticket holders and donors are not freely available but are rather held by the ticketing departments and annual funds of the universities that sell them. The figures for SEC ticket holders were collected from each participating university's ticket office independently by request for zip-code level data for confidentiality of buyers. This request was delivered to all fourteen schools in the Southeastern Conference. The ticketing offices of Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, LSU, Mississippi St., Missouri, Ole Miss, South Carolina, and Tennessee (9/14 schools) gave anonymous data that show the number of purchases of season tickets per zip code for either the 2014 or 2015 season. Data was requested for 2014, but some offices supplied only 2015. When possible, 2014 data was used. The Florida, Auburn, and Texas A&M ticketing offices declined to participate in this study; Alabama and Vanderbilt's offices never finalized the transaction of data. Single-game ticket data were less frequently given, but its data appeared in the same format with the addition of a notation of which game for which the tickets corresponded; only home football games were evaluated for single-game ticket analyses.

For donor data, a similar request for anonymous zip-code level data was delivered to all fourteen Southeastern conference annual funds. The Bulldog Club (Georgia), Bulldog Club (Mississippi St.), Gamecock Club, Gator Boosters, K Fund, Ole Miss Foundation, Razorback Foundation, Tennessee Foundation, Tiger Athletic Foundation (LSU), Tiger Scholarship Fund (Missouri), and Tigers Unlimited (Auburn) gave

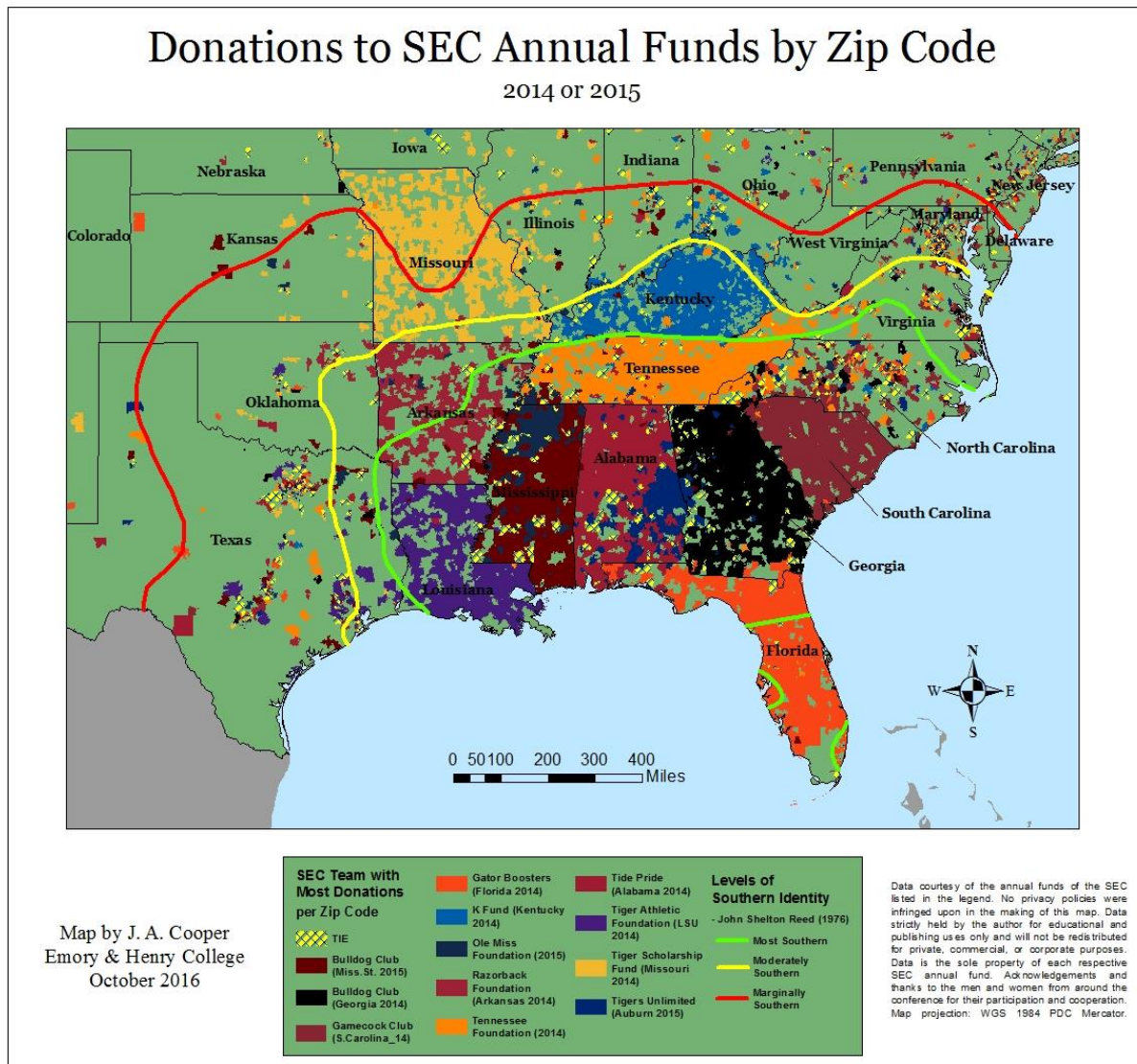
anonymous data that show the residential location of donors from either 2014 or 2015. Again, data was requested for 2014, but some offices supplied only 2015. When possible, 2014 data was used. The 12th Man Foundation at Texas A&M declined to participate in this study, and the National Commodore Club never finalized the transaction of data. As was the case with Barbara Shortridge's social geographic research, "information about income...length of residency in the state, and ethnicity would have been useful to this research."²¹⁹ I similarly decided not to request these data out of fear that officials "would view such inquiry as invasive" and therefore not give me the basic geographic data I was seeking.²²⁰

Both ticketing²²¹ and donation data were processed through Microsoft Excel, imported into ArcMap as a table, and joined with a zip code layer to create choropleth maps displaying the frequency purchases or donations by zip code polygon for individual schools. Additional analysis through Excel and ArcMap was conducted to generate maps showing a "winning" school for each zip code that symbolizes each zip code polygon based on the school that sold the most tickets or gleaned the most donations there.

²¹⁹ Barbara G. Shortridge, "Apple Stack Cake for Dessert: Appalachian Regional Foods," *Journal of Geography* 104, no. 2 (2005): 66.

²²⁰ Ibid, 66.

²²¹ Appendix 2.

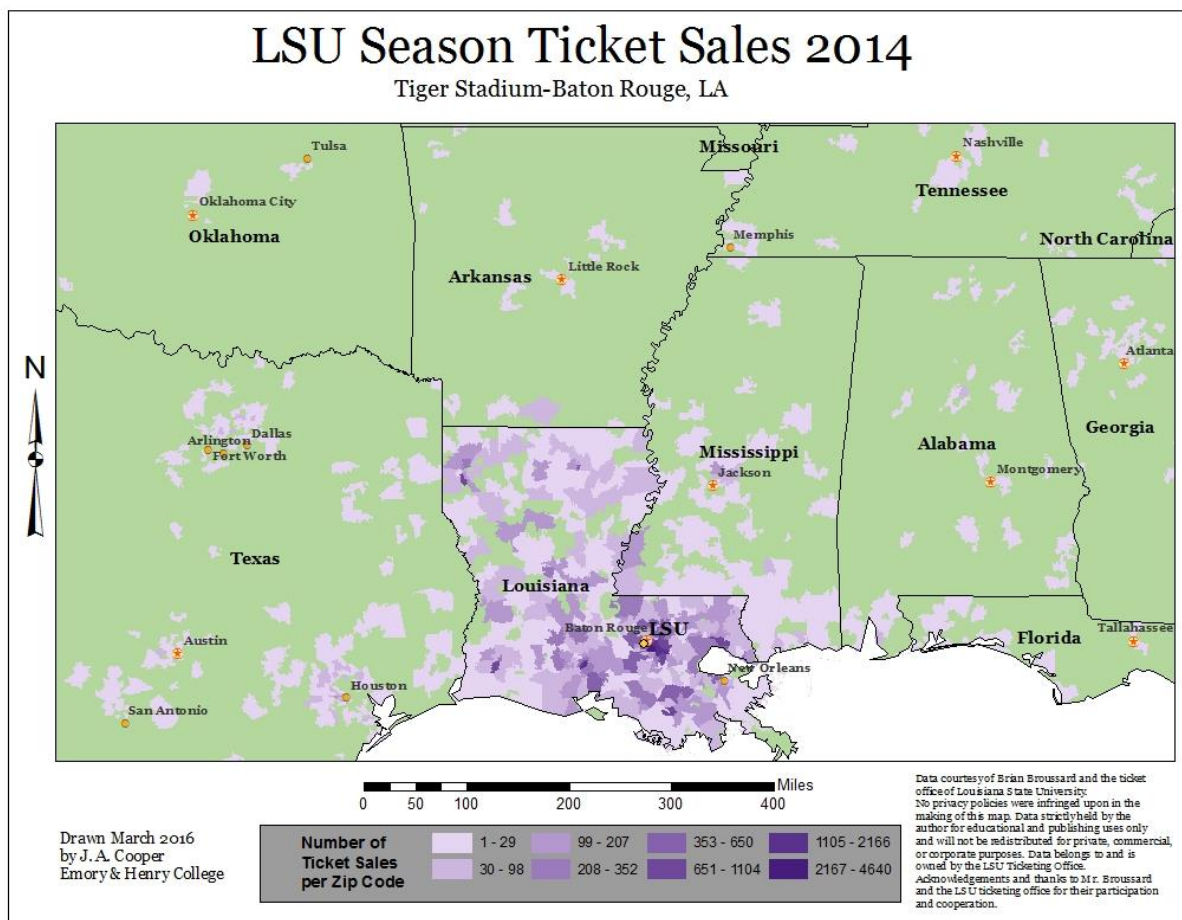


Discussion

Upon an initial look at the data, a striking feature emerges: the importance of state borders. For both season ticket sales and donations, patterns of economic activity seem to abruptly change at state borders. For example, nearly every zip code along the Alabama-Mississippi, Tennessee-Kentucky, South Carolina-Georgia, and Arkansas-Louisiana borders show an abrupt switch donor bases in accordance with each team's statewide footprint. For most SEC teams, they experience a superiority over their conference rivals within the state where they are located; at the border, allegiances in the

forms of donations and ticket sales change to reflect the institution-state connection.

This apparent importance of state borders is projected partly because of the cartographic choice to present the data in a winner-take-all type format per zip code. That is, when the SEC schools' data are all presented together, the team with the most donations or sales per zip code is represented in that particular polygon. Looking at the data on a team-by-team basis may change this outlook somewhat. Consider this map of LSU season ticket sales in 2014.



The Louisiana-Mississippi border does not halt the sale of LSU season tickets from expanding north. While the quantity thins out some, there is still a significant presence of ticket sales for LSU in Mississippi, especially in the more urban capital of

Jackson. However, when you examine the overall map of ticket sales for the SEC, very few zip codes are won by LSU. Even though Starkville and Oxford are farther away from southern Mississippi than Baton Rouge is, Ole Miss and Mississippi St. fare better than LSU in most zip codes all across their footprint, the state of Mississippi. The donations SEC map shows a further strengthening of state borders in this regard; LSU is represented by only one zip code in southern Mississippi; Mississippi State dominates, and Ole Miss is sparsely fully represented. Several zip codes represent a tie between any three of these institutions.

Generally, state borders seem to bound donations more than they do season ticket sales. Take Kentucky for example. Its season ticket sales data, the Wildcats have a significant amount of zip codes extending into Ohio around Cincinnati and up to Columbus. When examining donations, however, that presence drastically shrinks in both areas, and the Ohio River seems to contain Kentucky donations more than season ticket sales. A similar pattern is seen with Arkansas in neighboring Oklahoma and the urban center of Tulsa.

The cases where borders fail to bound fandom are especially intriguing. A few cases come to mind. Without data from Texas A&M and the 12th Man Foundation, speculation is the only basis off of which Aggie support can be estimated in terms of season ticket sales and donations. A representative was able to say that 88% of A&M donors live within the state of Texas itself and that the vast majority of them live within a 200 mile radius of College station. Aggie donors and season ticket holders would most likely most of eastern Texas, but without them represented, a sizable number of non-A&M donors and even more ticket sales can be seen throughout the region. Most of the major urban centers of Texas are represented (i.e. Houston, Austin, San Antonio, and Dallas-Fort Worth), but several zip codes in the region traditionally associated with the

South that are more rural are also represented in both data by a variety of teams. Of ticket sales, LSU has a clear majority, especially in Houston, though Arkansas displays a presence in northeast Texas. Donor data show a myriad of teams represented in both the urban and rural areas. The Texas state border does not entirely stifle the spread of SEC fandom into the Lone Star State. Is this due in part to it being part of the SEC footprint?

An area outside of the footprint that also shows a sizable SEC donor and season ticket holder presence is the state of North Carolina. While North Carolina is outside the SEC footprint, it has long been considered part of the South by many measures.²²² No state border dividing North Carolina from Tennessee, Georgia, or South Carolina stops the presence of SEC donors and season ticket holders in the Tar Heel State. When considering season ticket sales, South Carolina first and Tennessee second clearly have the most substantial presence. While the Gamecocks and Volunteers maintain a significant presence in North Carolina when considering donations to annual funds, there is more parity among SEC schools' presences there. Tennessee maintains a decent presence in the southern part of western North Carolina which could be attributed to the school's connection to Appalachia through its close proximity to the Smoky Mountains and tradition of being a school on Rocky Top as the song goes. The urban center of Charlotte is mostly represented by the Gamecocks of South Carolina which may be because of the short distance between Columbia and the Queen City with easy access via Interstate 77. What differentiates North Carolina from the patterns displayed in Texas mentioned above is that it is not just the urban centers that have an SEC presence. While Charlotte, Asheville, Greensboro, and Raleigh-Durham are all represented, a greater portion of North Carolina's rural areas are included in the SEC donor base. The presence

²²² Edward H. Davis & John T. Morgan, *Collards: A Southern Tradition from Seed to Table* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 142.

of SEC fandom in the form of donations and ticket sales is greater in North Carolina than anywhere else outside the SEC footprint. This phenomenon will be discussed in greater detail later.

While Virginia as a whole does not exhibit the extra-footprint fandom that North Carolina does, the southwest region of the commonwealth has a noticeable presence of Tennessee fandom. Donations and ticket sales for Tennessee extend northeast in Virginia along the Kentucky border through the mountainous Appalachian communities of Wise and Pound and along the Interstate 81 corridor through Abingdon all the way to Roanoke sporadically. This Tennessee presence outside of the Volunteer State is one of the more unique extensions of a single team's donor and ticket holder base outside of its footprint.

Another area of significance to mention is Atlanta, GA. While the city seems to be firmly saturated with Georgia Bulldog fans from both the season ticket and donation maps, it is in fact full of SEC fans from all over. For both attributes, northern Atlanta hosts fans from every team measured here. For 12 SEC teams, there are fans in northern Atlanta who are donating to annual funds all across the South. Atlanta is the most populous city in the South and important to SEC football because it plays host to the conference's championship game every December. When asked about this phenomenon, a representative from the Georgia Bulldog Club described Atlanta as an "in-and-out" type of city where people move there from all over and leave quickly. With the sheer number of people in the city, it makes sense for it to host such a large amount of fans. However, the University of Georgia has a more grounded and established fanbase there than other schools who have donors there who eventually move on. The representative used this logic to predict the Bulldogs' superior ticket sale and donation numbers in the city and was correct.

The winner-take-all approach of examining this data is useful in the multi-team maps of both season ticket sales and donations because it allows for a visual representation of the concentration of a team's support in relative terms to other SEC schools. This method is not without its flaws, however. Additional conferences ought to be studied but could not be included here due to the time constraints of an undergraduate honors thesis. Admittedly, data for every NCAA football school would help with considering multiple fan regions, especially in the winner-take-all maps. The *New York Times* 2014 article in *The Upshot* shows this well as it looked at zip code level data for Facebook likes from all NCAA D1 FBS schools.²²³ Comparing this map to the SEC Donations map can give some interesting insights.

The SEC footprint is not exclusive. Within these same Southern states, there are five ACC schools and several other FBS schools. If donation and ticketing data were collected for Clemson, Florida State, Miami, Georgia Tech, and Louisville (ACC), there would most likely be some significant encroachment to some SEC teams' territory shown by these maps. The *New York Times*' data supports this in areas like the panhandle of Florida. Donations to the Gator Boosters (Florida), Tide Pride (Alabama) and Tigers Unlimited (Auburn), and the Bulldog Club (Georgia) are lacking in the panhandle region of Florida. Not only is this area strongly associated culturally with the Deep South, but it also is potentially a stronghold for the fan region of Florida State of the ACC.²²⁴ The *New York Times* Facebook "likes" data shows zip codes spanning the entirety of the panhandle of Florida (with the exception of the area around Pensacola that shows a stronger support for Alabama). How would the presence of Seminole Boosters

²²³ Tom Giratikanon, Josh Katz, David Leonhardt, Kevin Quealy, and Mark Tracy, "N.C.A.A. Fan Map: How the Country Roots for College Football," *The New York Times*, last modified 3 October, 2014.

²²⁴ Ary J. Lamme III & Raymond K. Oldakowski, "Vernacular Areas in Florida," *Southeastern Geographer* 22, no 2 (November 1982): 100.

data affect the donations map that seems to show the Florida panhandle as a part of “SEC country”? Similar questions can be raised about areas in Georgia (specifically in Atlanta, a stronghold for SEC fandom as established earlier but the host city for ACC team Georgia Tech), Kentucky, and especially South Carolina that hosts defending national champion Clemson in its Piedmont region.²²⁵ Other areas that would benefit from having more extensive data are Memphis and southern Mississippi where the universities bearing those names show a sizable presence in the *New York Times*’ map. The winner-take-all method of mapping donations and season ticket sales is useful when comparing only SEC teams’ areas of strength with these attributes of fandom, but the presence of large quantities of fans supporting non-SEC teams that could supersede SEC support in some areas is not shown.

Another consideration with this data is that it is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. What is shown on these maps are the reports from a single year from these offices. This is of course still valuable data in helping discern where support for each of these institutions exist, but it is a tricky task to use a snapshot of data to make generalizations about the character of a phenomenon.²²⁶ This data can change year by year for a variety of reasons. The Bulldog Club at the University of Georgia provided data for both 2014 and 2015, and many zip codes within the state of Georgia saw a change in the number of donors between the two years. As it is with vernacular regions, fan regions are fluid and can shift over time.

There is also a discrepancy between season ticket and single-game ticket sales. Single-game ticket sale data was not given by every institution, and maps concerning

²²⁵ Charles F. Kovacic & John J. Winberry, *South Carolina: A Geography* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 212.

²²⁶ Earl Babbie, *The Basics of Social Research* 6th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2014), 110. (cite in biblio; research meth textbooks)

this data come with their own complications. Consider the series of maps displaying the University of Tennessee's 2014 single-game ticket sales.²²⁷

The overall area of sales is much larger and more geographically diverse than the season ticket sales area. This is not surprising considering the sheer number of single-game ticket sales versus season ticket sales. It is much easier for a fan in Fayetteville, NC, for example, to make a single game than to commit to attending an entire season of seven or eight home games. However, great variability can be seen between single games. This Tennessee data is broken up into its constituent parts that show each home game from the Volunteers' 2014 season. The results show the variability in geographic patterns of ticket sales from game to game.

The University of Tennessee's ticketing department had already noticed some variation and suggested that even the time of the game's kickoff could affect attendance. The hypothesis was that those in the Central Time Zone (i.e. Nashville) would affect sales. A brief analysis of the state of Tennessee's zip codes was conducted to test this theory. Each zip code's sales total for each game was counted, and the game with the most tickets sold in that zip code was given a score of 1. Each game's scores were totaled. The games were consolidated by whether they were a midday, afternoon, or night game, and averaged accordingly. In the state of Tennessee overall, night games proved to be the most popular by zip code. However, in the zip codes within a 25 mile radius of Nashville, afternoon games were the most popular with night games being the least popular. Perhaps Nashville Volunteers are more attracted to games in which they can return home at a reasonable hour rather than coming home in the middle of the night. This example goes to show the volatile nature of single game tickets and why, besides the

²²⁷ Appendix 3.

absence of such data, it is not used as a composite measure of fandom in this study; season tickets are given preference.

These measurements of season ticket holders and donors are only part of the complete picture of SEC fandom because ticket holders and donors do not represent the whole of the fanbase. When asked about the nature of ticket holders, SEC officials who provided the data for this study responded that season ticket holders are those fans who (in theory) make a commitment to going to each home game of the year. Often times, these fans are alumni of the university in question, but there are plenty of “sidewalk alumni” who never attended the institution but live as one vicariously through sports. Ticket holders embrace the hassles of journeying to the spectate, tailgating, and attending the games rather than simply and more easily watching them on television; this effort makes them more passionate. However, not all “true fans” attend games for a variety of reasons such as travel and ticket expenses. In fact, a vast majority of fans do not have season tickets; instead, an elite group of fans control the best seats. They are habitual attenders of games, and those without season tickets aspire to this level of fandom. Often, these fans achieve their status through donations to annual funds.

The structure of annual funds make donating to athletic departments and reaping the benefits of perks such as the opportunity to additionally purchase season tickets and participate in exclusive events put on by the athletic departments more accessible than only including those wealthy fans who make major gifts contributions. By donating, these people become investors that separate them from the casual fans; they put money into the athletic departments to contribute to the off-field aspects of competition that require money such as building stadiums and funding scholarships that are necessary to attract the best players to therefore compete on the field. In this way, donors become part of the on-field success that they hope to witness.

The fact that not everyone can display their fandom in such a lucrative way gives these investors status that separates them from lower fans who almost become an Other. Donors are usually devoted fans, but fans are not always devoted investors in this way. The act of donating money financially differentiates a fan from a customer, investor, and dedicated spectator. Often times, this act is a means to the end of gleaning season tickets; they donate because they are handcuffed to do so if they want the season tickets. Stadium seats more and more have a donation attached to them. Many schools in the SEC have a donation tied to nearly every seat in the stadiums. The University of Alabama is moving away from this into a more philanthropic form of attracting donations, but this is a new phenomenon that hasn't fully taken hold. Annual donations to Tide Pride for existing customers at the time of the policy switch are still the avenue to season tickets.

Using ticket sales and donations is a somewhat of a capitalistic measure of fandom. Just as will be argued with the sale of merchandise, the expenditure of money for the goal of athletic support is an indicator of the consumer's values.²²⁸ This capitalistic train of thought says that money spent by the consumer on athletic fandom could have been spent on anything else, but the consumer has chosen to value a commodity that is a vehicle for his or her expression of fandom. The choice was made in this study to not collect data on the exact monetary sum spent in each ticket sale and given in each donation due to the principle held by sever officials in SEC annual funds that fandom cannot be quantified by a dollar amount. However, each sale and donation is monetarily connected and therefore can be considered economically. This leads to the

²²⁸ Donghun Lee, Galen T. Trail, Hyungil H. Kwon, and Dean F. Anderson. "Consumer Values Versus Perceived Product Attributes: Relationships among Items from the MVS, PRS, and PERVAL Scales." *Sport Management Review* 14, no. 1 (2011).

assumption that the expenditure of money means the consumer values the service he or she purchases.

According to this perspective, the ticketing offices and annual funds are businesses that try to sell a product of a good game-day experience and perks of annual fund membership. This necessary because competition exists for the attention of sports lovers. In the maps of SEC donation and ticket sales, territorial competition between SEC institutions is shown, but this is not usually an economic competition. SEC tickets compete with television and other sports franchises instead. Consider a hypothetical fan from Missouri. Unlike states such as Alabama or Florida, “Missouri...has only one major college team” for this fan to support with his or her attendance.²²⁹ However, instead of going to a Tigers game in Columbia, the fan could chose to travel to Kansas City to see a Chiefs (NFL) or Royals (MLB) professional game in the west part of the state or go east to see the Cardinals (MLB) or (at the time of the 2014 data before their move to Los Angeles, CA) the Rams (NFL). Representatives from the University of Missouri noted this in the Tigers’ struggle to attract fans; indeed, this geographic situation may contribute to their inability to sell out Faurot Field as easily as their other SEC counterparts. A Tiger Scholarship Fund representative noted that “Mizzou competes against Royals, not Razorbacks.”

This theme of competition with (or a lack thereof) professional sports and the resulting effect on the quantity and geographic dispersion of donations and season ticket sales appeared again and again throughout the SEC. An Arkansas official noted that in contrast to Missouri, Arkansas’ position as the only Power 5 team in the state is a significant factor for ticket sales, and the lack of a professional team of any kind in the

²²⁹ John F. Rooney, “Up from the Mines and Out from the Parries: Some Geographical Implications of Football in the United States,” *Geographical Review* 59, no. 4 (October, 1969): 476.

state means that the Razorbacks football team is the state's professional team. An Alabama official noted a similar situation in that while it competes with Auburn for fans, there is not a consumer choice between the two schools; a fan is going to support one or the other as oscillation between the two sides of the Iron Bowl is very rare. Rather the lack of professional teams in the state allows college football fandom to flourish. Tennessee for a long time was unrivaled in its statewide presence (except for Vanderbilt, but the Commodores' football tradition simply is not as storied as the Volunteers'), but recently the Titans (NFL) and Grizzlies (NBA) have moved into Nashville and Memphis respectively. However, an official was confident that the Volunteers do well against these teams in competition because of the tradition of Tennessee Volunteer football being the state's established sporting team.

It is not only professional sports teams that compete for gameday attendance; television does this as well. Television is a more convenient way for a fan to connect to the team on the field, avoiding the hassle and cost of participating in the gameday experience. The willingness of donors and season ticket holders to spend the money and go through this hassle is a fortifying reason why this data is important to the present study, but there are many people who do not watch the games in person who should still be considered fans.²³⁰ TV-watchers are able to experience the conveniences of home while engaging with their fandom, but they might do this with what an Alabama official called a "remote control mindset" where the channel can be changed at any time if what is on the screen is not appealing. Many offices around the conferences expressed concern about this developing trend in fandom. An Ole Miss representative identified television as the main competitor with ticketing in Oxford. A Florida official was

²³⁰ C.C. Roseman & Fred M. Shelley, "The Geography of Collegiate Football Radio Broadcasting," *Sport Place* 2, no. 2 (1988).

particularly uneasy about this trend; she saw television as a catalyst for a move away from the traditional situation of gameday being a family-centered event. Home-watching “is competing and has changed the landscape of fandom.” In a direct response to this recognition, Ole Miss has installed Wi-Fi in Vaught-Hemingway Stadium to make the experience at the spectate more attractive to fans.

Other methods of attracting fans have been implemented as well. Some schools have opted to install large scoreboards with a video screen for fans to see the game on to make the spectate more like television. Auburn for instance just spent a great sum of money (raised by donors) to install such a system.²³¹ Many stadiums have also focused on refurbishing their boxed seats for the largest donors to sit in. These areas can come complete with a complementary buffet, televisions, and air conditioning that makes the gameday experience even similar to how it would feel on the couch at home. The University of Kentucky went as far to decrease its stadium size to expand and improve its box seating to attract the biggest donors to the games.²³² So, this study’s data on season ticket holders and donors is not without competition. Because the donors have made the economic choice to purchase tickets despite the competition, they are even more valuable fans consider in a fan region.

Conclusion

The patterns of season ticket sales and donations around the Southeastern Conference seem to conform broadly to the in-state footprint for each school, especially with donations. Exceptions such as Texas, North Carolina, and southwest Virginia have an unusual presence of SEC season ticket sales and donations. Single-game ticket sales

²³¹ Appendix 4.

²³² Appendix 5.

data was not included on a large scale for lack of consistency across multiple schools and for volatility in the data from game to game. The season ticket sales and donation data is not without its drawbacks: incomplete data from both SEC offices and other DI FBS schools renders the analysis only partial, and the data is cross-sectional and gives only a yearlong snapshot for each team's economic geographic pattern of sales and donations. However, it is still valuable to include in the analysis because of the nature of these fans: they are dedicated, habitual attenders of games who invest in the athletic departments. They are consumers of the product of SEC football, and the offices who provide this service experience competition (just as any other business would) with professional sports teams and television. With the cost and hassle of continual gameday attendance that is usually enabled by a donation to an annual fund in spite of competition with other activities or home watching, this data provides a geography of a unique, lucrative, and important type of fandom to consider when delineating the overall SEC fan region.

Radio Stations

In an attempt to examine more than just the season ticket and donation data, the present study examines more attributes of fandom that are more accessible to the average fan. This will allow for a more authentic approach to delineating the SEC fan region that considers a wide variety of people who may or may not have the opportunity to attend football games in person. For example, football games are broadcasted on the radio as a service to those who are not in the stadium to watch the action firsthand. Varied yet complementary data that provide many examination angles can shed light on a more robust SEC fan region.

In 1988, the journal *Sport Place* published a study by Roseman and Shelley examining the radio coverage of U.S. college football. The authors sought to assess the

“experience of college football in places away from the stadium.”²³³ Radio has a long history as an instrument for the diffusion for sports information, the recruiting of team fans, the promotion of ticket sales, and fundraising from donors.²³⁴ Roseman and Shelley were among the first to recognize something larger in scale: the sports fan’s place identity.

The power of the mass media in identity formation had already been established, and this media can “often contribute to our knowledge...of places and their people.”²³⁵ Roseman and Shelley connect these concepts to an idea of sports fan identity; fandom therefore is mapped here using the pattern of mass media networks to connect back to identity in the context of SEC football.

Like Roseman and Shelley, this study assumes that the geography of radio sports broadcasting reflects demand from the fans; in other words, where there are sufficient fans, radio sports coverage will follow. Of course, other factors influence the geography of radio sports coverage, such as the pattern of available radio stations, which in turn depends on several factors. Also, AM stations can have a wider range than FM stations, especially at night, but the difference (perhaps as much as 200 miles) is not so great that the results are significantly compromised. In the case of collegiate sports radio, there are other qualifications. For example, the radio coverage could depend less on the ability to sell advertising and more on the size and budget of a college’s athletic program. In any case, the presence of a sports show on a radio station may be safely assumed to indicate significant fan demand for that show among the listeners in that area.

²³³ C.C. Roseman & Fred M. Shelley, “The Geography of Collegiate Football Radio Broadcasting,” *Sport Place* 2, no. 2 (1988): 43.

²³⁴ D. R. Howard and J. L. Crompton, “Tactics Used by Sports Organizations in the United States to Increase Ticket Sales,” *Managing Leisure* 9, no. 2 (2007).

²³⁵ Tracy Lauder, “Southern Identity in Southern Living Magazine,” *Journal of Geography* 111, no. 1 (2011): 2727.

Data and Methods

Roseman and Shelley examined different spatial distributions of radio affiliates from the year 1987 across the United States for many different teams and constructed different types of fan bases using these distributions. They did this by mailing surveys to the sports information director at each university whose football team competed in the NCAA Division 1-A (the modern-day FBS) and Division 1-AA (today's FCS) along with “a few others located in regions lacking major universities in the first two categories” (p 43). Their response rate was about 77 percent.

Because information about sports radio broadcasting is now available online, the current study can rely on more comprehensive data. Roseman and Shelley's study serves as the inspiration for the data mapping and analysis rather than its collection. Each SEC university maintains a webpage on its institution's official athletic website that lists all of the radio station affiliates that broadcast football games. Some pages provided locations from which the stations broadcast while others did not. In certain cases, further research was necessary to determine the locations of the studios (and not the radio towers) that broadcast the games. As with the 1988 study, the data is expressed using points rather than polygons to display the radio network's geographic reach. While the difference between AM and FM ranges is acknowledged, point data is used as a surrogate for polygon data, but in most cases this will not detract from the analysis of radio patterns. Each institution's radio locations were batch geocoded to obtain these points spatially and then examined team by team and together as a conference.²³⁶

Discussion

Roseman and Shelley's main conclusion was that state borders play an important

²³⁶ Appendix 6.

role in the delineation of fan regions.²³⁷ This examination of SEC radio stations supports this conclusion.

The classification of “state saturation” truly applies to 11 of the 14 institutions. This means that a university’s radio coverage matched rather closely to the borders of the state where that school was located. This broadcasting strategy may reflect a rational strategy of many “comprehensive public universities,” a description that fits all SEC schools except for Vanderbilt.²³⁸ Stations carrying these teams’ football programming thus commonly blanket that school’s home state, making football games available to listeners anywhere within the state’s borders. For example, Gator fans wanting to listen to a University of Florida football game can do so all the way from Miami to Pensacola and from Tampa to Jacksonville. Anywhere across the Sunshine State, Gator football can be heard. Florida’s one outlying point in Griffin, GA does not constitute enough of an out-of-state presence for its pattern to be considered multi-state coverage.

However, “multi-state coverage” does exist in the SEC.²³⁹ This pattern is exhibited where the radio stations of a team’s network extend vastly beyond the boundaries of the state the institution is in. These few cases reflect instances in which state borders that are normally so instrumental in bounding collegiate fan bases are transcended for one reason or another. Auburn and Alabama are the two SEC schools to demonstrate this type of pattern; in addition to saturating the state of Alabama, they both have stations located in Tennessee, Mississippi, the panhandle of Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. The state of Alabama and its two most predominant institutions

²³⁷ C.C. Roseman & Fred M. Shelley, “The Geography of Collegiate Football Radio Broadcasting,” *Sport Place* 2, no. 2 (1988): 43.

²³⁸ Ibid 44.

²³⁹ Ibid, 46.

often carry the banner of the Southeastern Conference. College football in the South came to popularity with Alabama's iconic 1926 Rose Bowl win over the University of Washington, and this victory pushed the Crimson Tide to become "the leading source of regional pride" in the Roaring 20s.²⁴⁰ The trend has continued into the modern era. As of 2017, seven out of the last eight college football national championship games have featured either Auburn or Alabama, and five of those have been victories. This is important because for Southern teams, "athletic superiority...is a flattering story that offers a basis of keen regional pride and serves as a source of relentless bragging rights" that is "likely one of the strongest forces defining regional identity in the South."²⁴¹ Consistent success has helped to expand the fanbases of these victorious institutions geographically.

Vanderbilt University, the only private school in the SEC, is also the only school to exhibit "within-state regional coverage," or a grouping "of networks, usually three to seven stations, located within a certain region of a state."²⁴² Of Vanderbilt's nine stations, seven are within Middle Tennessee; only the urban centers of Memphis and Chattanooga provide coverage of the Commodores to the other regions of Tennessee. All of the Middle Tennessee stations are either in Nashville or in between there and Huntsville, AL. Surprisingly, no station exists in Clarksville, a Middle Tennessee city to the north of Nashville. One quality Roseman and Shelley observed in schools that exhibited this pattern in 1987 was that they were often located "in places distant from

²⁴⁰ Wes Borucki, "'You're Dixie's Football Pride': American College Football and the Resurgence of Southern Identity," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 10 (2003): 479.

²⁴¹ Vaughn May, "'Planes Don't Fly North': College Football Recruiting and the Oppositional South," *Studies in Popular Culture* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 50.

Larry Joe Morgan and Ted Klimasewski, "Pigskin Power Region: Dominance of Southern Collegiate Football," *Southeastern Geographer* 55, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 216.

²⁴² C.C. Roseman & Fred M. Shelley, "The Geography of Collegiate Football Radio Broadcasting," *Sport Place* 2, no. 2 (1988): 45.

the comprehensive state universities” (p 45). Vanderbilt is a private college and competes for territory with the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, certainly the Volunteer State’s most well-known comprehensive university. Radio broadcasts for the University of Tennessee saturate the entire state; this perhaps renders it more difficult for the smaller, private Vanderbilt to establish the same fanbase through all of Tennessee. Additionally, Vanderbilt sees competition in West Tennessee from both Memphis and Ole Miss, is bound to the north by the University of Kentucky, and even shares space within its own south-of-Nashville region with the University of Alabama. Rather than attempting to establish a broad network, the Commodores cater particularly to the Middle Tennessee fans instead.

Roseman and Shelley did not receive responses from every school in 1987, so therefore it is difficult to assess longitudinal changes in the data. Of the seven institutions in the SEC studied in 1987, six of those have seen a loss in the number of stations.²⁴³ Alabama is the only team to have gained stations, and they have done so significantly. The Crimson Tide are also the only team to move up in classification; they move from state saturation to multi-state coverage. Vanderbilt is the only school to move down; they slid to within-state regional coverage from state saturation. Other schools Roseman and Shelley studied have maintained their saturation of their states. This general trend in the decrease in radio stations across the board for teams not winning national championships regularly like Alabama is understandable considering the modern place of radio and media in delivering the product of remote connection to a game to the consumer.

This modern nature of radio is important to consider. Mass media networks are

²⁴³ Appendix 7.

much larger today than in the 1980s, as sports fans can follow the action through a wide array of cable and satellite television, and even streaming websites. But one format remains the staple for many fans because they can access it while traveling: radio. Radio is examined here instead of television because while both help remote fans connect to a team, Roseman and Shelly argue that “the radio audience is generally more reflective of true fan support for a particular team than the television audience.”²⁴⁴

The nature of radio is also being changed by satellite radio. Sirius XM, the near monopoly in the industry, has stations for broadcasting up to three games from each of the Power 5 conferences simultaneously, and that does not count whatever games ESPN Radio or Fox Sports Radio have on their channels. Anywhere in North America, someone could listen to an SEC football game. Indeed, I myself enjoyed listening via satellite radio to an Auburn-Kentucky game played on a Thursday night in 2015 while I was well outside of the reach of either team’s radio networks. I listened because I am a fan of SEC football and experienced it through satellite radio. However, we currently lack the means to study the geographic patterns of satellite radio as it is available all across the continent and indeed around the world if one streams Sirius XM online. While this is another way of consuming college football radio broadcasting, the local level data is sufficient to examine as an attribute of fandom because of the assumption of the demand that exists in those locations for the broadcasting.

Conclusion

Roseman and Shelley’s 1988 paper, “The Geography of Collegiate Football Radio Broadcasting,” demonstrated a geographical method for studying the spatial patterns of

²⁴⁴ C.C. Roseman & Fred M. Shelley, “The Geography of Collegiate Football Radio Broadcasting,” *Sport Place* 2, no. 2 (1988): 50.

the fandom of “college football in places away from the stadium.”²⁴⁵ The methodology used in this study has been adopted here to examine the geography of Southeastern Conference radio patterns. When examined, the data supported Roseman & Shelley’s conclusion that “state boundaries help in defining the spatial distribution of fans.” Eleven of the fourteen universities displayed state saturation patterns and provided service to the entirety of their statewide footprint. The exceptions were Vanderbilt which offered within-state regional coverage to Middle Tennessee and Alabama and Auburn which support a multi-state coverage network. When examined longitudinally, the only changes made in radio coverage patterns since 1987 were made by Vanderbilt and Alabama which both used to saturate their states. Except for Alabama, all networks lost a number of affiliate stations. If media serves as a means to reinforce fan loyalty and identity, the majority of SEC teams help their fans reinforce their state identities through local radio coverage.

Social Media & the Internet

Social media represents a medium by which a large group of people can interact with and express their fandom and identities. The internet is more accessible means of expressing fandom than are donations or tickets; it is much easier to click “like” on Facebook, tweet on Twitter, or search on Google than it is to purchase a ticket and spend at least a day tailgating and attending a game. Online resources create a massive amount of data that is continually produced, and that resulting “information always has a geography.”²⁴⁶ The mere existence of data however does “not necessarily equate to useful

²⁴⁵ C.C. Roseman & Fred M. Shelley, “The Geography of Collegiate Football Radio Broadcasting,” *Sport Place* 2, no. 2 (1988): 43.

²⁴⁶ Ate Poorthuis, Matthew Zook Taylor Shelton, Mark Graham, and Monica Stephens. “Using Geotagged Digital Social Data in Geographic Research,” *Key Methods in Geography*, ed. N. Clifford, S. French, M. Cope, and S. Gillespie (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, 2016), 1.

insights and meaningful analysis.”²⁴⁷ But when the information is handled with care, its analysis can help “define how we understand and create places” which renders the study of internet geographies “fundamental to the study of human geography.”²⁴⁸

Several examples of internet data analysis being used in human or sports geography are pertinent to the present study. In Orion Stand-Gravois’ 2012 master’s thesis, he used Google search frequencies as an attribute of fandom for examining the Auburn football fan region.²⁴⁹ In 2014, the New York Times published an article on its Upshot page that “estimated the boundaries of fandom for 84 [college football] teams” based on Facebook likes.²⁵⁰ The resulting interactive webmap shows the data at the zip code level in percentage format and is colored based on the team with the highest percentage of likes. This was a popular article that has widely acknowledged in colloquial discussions on modern collegiate football fandom geographies.

Matthew Zook and Ate Poorthuis recognize the potential for digital social data to contribute to research in cultural geography. Working primarily with Twitter data, these authors discuss at length methods for utilizing large digital datasets to map social trends. They provide a careful analysis of the potential biases and problems with using these data including “over-representation of...wealthy places...urban dwellers... and men.”²⁵¹ However, they provide specific GIS methodology to combat such biases such as

²⁴⁷ Poorthuis and Matthew Zook, “Small Stories in Big Data: Gaining Insights from Large Spatial Point Pattern Datasets” in *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research* 17, no. 1 (2015), 151.

²⁴⁸ Ate Poorthuis, Matthew Zook Taylor Shelton, Mark Graham, and Monica Stephens. “Using Geotagged Digital Social Data in Geographic Research,” *Key Methods in Geography*, ed. N. Clifford, S. French, M. Cope, and S. Gillespie (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, 2016), 1.

²⁴⁹ Orion Michael Stand-Gravois, “A Geographical Investigation of Football and its Fans at Auburn University,” (Unpublished Master’s Thesis: Auburn University, 2012), 89-90.

²⁵⁰ Tom Giratikanon, Josh Katz, David Leonhardt, Kevin Quealy, and Mark Tracy, “N.C.A.A. Fan Map: How the Country Roots for College Football,” *The New York Times*, last modified 3 October, 2014.

²⁵¹ Ate Poorthuis, Matthew Zook Taylor Shelton, Mark Graham, and Monica Stephens. “Using Geotagged Digital Social Data in Geographic Research,” *Key Methods in Geography*, ed. N. Clifford, S. French, M. Cope, and S. Gillespie (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, 2016), 1-2.

using arbitrary hexagonal polygons rather than points to represent social phenomenon.²⁵² Social phenomenon can be successfully mapped using digital social data.

Data & Methods

This study included little primary research on the geography of online fandom. Google search data from the past five years was easily downloadable on the search engine's "Trends" page it maintains. Google assigns a score to each region that allows for a comparable measure geographically of search terms. These scores were downloaded via CSV from this page for the search terms "Southeastern Conference" and "SEC Football" by state. This data was integrated into ArcGIS via a conversion from Excel to a table and mapped as polygon vector data at the state level.

Twitter data was collected by collecting geotagged tweets concerning the SEC football championship game featuring the Alabama Crimson Tide against the Florida Gators in 2015 using code in the program R. The code searched for tweets using "#SEC", "SEC", and "#SECATL". The resulting data was output in point form. This data was extremely limited with only 7 tweets successfully pulled with a geolocation attached; it was not voluminous enough to draw any meaningful conclusions, and therefore the results were not included in this study.

The New York Times' article on "How the Country Roots for College Football" was extensive and impressive. No attempt was made to obtain the raw data used in this study from Facebook, but a request was sent to the authors of this article on a collaboration for the purposes of studying SEC football fandom. No response was ever given.

Discussion

²⁵² Poorthuis and Matthew Zook, "Small Stories in Big Data: Gaining Insights from Large Spatial Point Pattern Datasets" in *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research* 17, no. 1 (2015), 154-155.

Google search terms show complete SEC measures rather than individual team measures. The data would be different if searches for each of the 14 schools football programs were examined. However, this composite measure of SEC fandom shows a geographic trend of who might be interested in searching for information on the conference as a whole. Part of the overall notion of SEC fandom contributing to Southern identity is the collective fandom that SEC supporters have for all teams within the conference. SEC fans will support teams within the conference because the SEC represents a collective regional grouping of schools that can carry the banner of the South. Google searches for the terms “Southeastern Conference” and “SEC Football” therefore are still useful data to examine when considering SEC fandom.

The results at the state level mostly reflect the SEC footprint.²⁵³ Alabama and Mississippi (in that order) represented the states with the top scores which are all over 75. Tennessee, Arkansas, South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, and Kentucky group together to form a solid block of second tier with scores for both searches from 31-47 for “Southeastern Conference” and 24-42 for “SEC Football.” A third tier exists with Missouri, Florida, Oklahoma, Texas, and North Carolina. Scores for this tier range from 9-18. For the first time, states outside of the SEC footprint (i.e. North Carolina and Oklahoma) make an appearance. Missouri and Florida are both on top of this tier, but Texas has a lower score than North Carolina for “SEC Football” and Oklahoma for both searches. This is especially interesting considering that the five year period measured for these searches includes 2012 when Texas A&M joined the SEC. It begs the question: to what extent is the average Texan an SEC fan (whether they support A&M, LSU, or otherwise)? The *New York Times*’ article based on Facebook likes would suggest that the

²⁵³ Appendix 8.

majority of college football fandom in the Lone Star State is focused on the Texas Longhorns of the Big XII Conference. Can Texas be a part of “SEC Country” if the Longhorns dominate the fandom there?

A fourth tier of states exists at the bottom including all not mentioned here. Notably, Virginia, the only state in the traditional vernacular South not yet mentioned, is included in this tier.²⁵⁴ The pocket of SEC (primarily Tennessee and Kentucky) fans shown to exist in Southwest Virginia by other attributes clearly was not able to help the Old Dominion State in Google searches. This is not surprising considering that the majority of Virginia’s population exists in the eastern part of the state and may experience a distance decay from SEC football fandom.²⁵⁵ Additionally, it is firmly part of the ACC footprint as it hosts both Virginia Tech and the University of Virginia.

Twitter data collected from the 2015 SEC Championship Game was extremely limited because of both errors in code and the limited number of tweets that are geotagged to begin with. This data would have been problematic anyways because it featured a game between two SEC teams. The real-time aspect of Twitter makes data collection for fourteen teams difficult in any attempt for a conference-wide search; searches for team-by-team data would be more thorough and representative of the overall conference fanbase because SEC fandom is rooted first and foremost in the fandom of each individual team. Additionally, the search terms “#SEC” and “SEC” could have returned data referring to the Securities and Exchange Commission or an abbreviation for the word “second.” However, the attempt to glean Twitter data was

²⁵⁴ John Shelton Reed, “The Heart of Dixie: An Essay in Folk Geography” *Social Forces* 54, no. 4 (Jun, 1976).

²⁵⁵ Mona Domosh, Roderick P. Neumann, Patricia L. Price, and Terry G. Jordan, eds, *The Human Mosaic: A Cultural Approach to Human Geography* 11th ed. (New York: W.H. Freedman and Company, 2010), 12.

mentioned because of the need for this type of user-generated geolocated social data to be included in analyses of social phenomenon like fandom. Twitter has the potential to improve the study of identity and vernacular regions.

The *New York Times*' "NCAA Fan Map: How the Country Roots for College Football" is a particularly interesting source because it employs the "winner-take-all" method of display used to assess fan regions with season tickets sales and donations earlier. The webmap uses percentages of Facebook likes to decide a winner of a zip code which normalizes the data by total Facebook users. It measures therefore those who both have access to the internet and who choose to be on Facebook; those without or chose to not interact with these media are left out of the data.

While the source data could not be acquired as an attribute of SEC fandom for this study, it is another measure of an easily accessible display of fandom that would be valuable to consider. Its use of data for all teams is especially useful for considering areas such as Texas and the Florida panhandle. Texas as previously mentioned is dominated by the University of Texas in this map which questions the extent to which counting the state of Texas as part of Texas A&M's territory is valid. The same might be said for the area of Florida around Tallahassee, home of Florida State (ACC). This culturally Southern region of the Sunshine State is dominated by Seminole fans on Facebook. Clemson (ACC) dominates the Piedmont region of South Carolina. The University of Memphis (AAC) has a large presence in its urban home. Louisville takes a chunk of the state of Kentucky around its urban center. This webmap is a useful tool for examining where people all across the country click "like" to show support for their team.

Google, Twitter, and Facebook demonstrate different connective tools people use to interact with their fandom on the worldwide web. The internet is a space for

information that has a real, geographic place tied to it. Fan communities that exist in places are extended to the internet through its different tools. Fans further interact with their fandom through either learning more about it by searching for related content online via search engines like Google or by expressing their identity as a fan of a certain team through social media. Fans attempt to better integrate themselves into their communities of fandom.

These communities of fandom are framed here as imagined communities that construct fanbases. This very aspect of media provides a convincing reason why fanbases can be thought of as imagined communities. On the development of nationalism, Benedict Anderson writes that “increasingly rapid communications” in the form of “print-capitalism....made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves and to relate themselves to others in profoundly new ways.”²⁵⁶ This new way was in the form of the nation, the political form of an imagined community. Today, the internet and social media increase the capacity of technology to make it possible for mass quantities of modern individuals to relate themselves to others instantly. There are simply so many more platforms and avenues for the development or advancement of imagined communities.

A critical point of Anderson’s conception of the imagined community is that its members cannot meet all the other members of the community, yet they all share a perceived fraternal bond. The internet seems to be a superb medium for this because it allows people who are removed in location to connect and bond over a shared interest without ever meeting or establishing the foundation bonds of a more authentic and actual community. This is the very idea Doheny-Farina fights against because he is

²⁵⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (New York: Verso, 2016), 36.

concerned that virtual communities are not communities at all but are rather lifestyle enclaves of a superficial single-interest connection tailored to modern “isolated individuals.”²⁵⁷ But the imagined community is perceived by its members to exist rather than a “real” or “authentic” one.

Matt Hill discusses the place of the internet in groups of fans in constructing imagined communities but does so critically. Rather than imagined communities, he frames internet groups as “communities of imagination;” the latter are more intentional than the former; indeed, “rather than a coincidence in the temporality of information and consumption” that characterizes imagined communities, “the defining coincidence” of a community of imagination “is affective.”²⁵⁸ Hill contends additionally that because of the more intentional nature of these communities of imagination, they are more at risk for splintering because of the more intentional way in which they are constructed and maintained.

Hill was writing this at the turn of the century when the internet was a new phenomenon on ideas of fandom that did not include sports fandom. He does not address the competitive spirit in sport, particularly the variety shown by the Southern desire to win on the college football field, in Hill’s analysis of fandom. The community of imagination acts as “as specific defense against the possible ‘otherness’...of the...intensity and emotionality of fandom.”²⁵⁹ On the contrary, sports fandom works inherently to create an “other;” it is an “us versus them” affair that music, television, and film is not. I would argue that imagined communities found under the umbrella of Southeastern Conference football fandom are not so “mechanical and taken-for-granted”

²⁵⁷ Stephen Doheny-Farina, *The Wired Neighborhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 50.

²⁵⁸ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 180.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 180.

as Hill might suggest due to their competitive nature, and internet activity related to this fandom would still “not only celebrate and validate the fan’s knowledge” but would “also [mirror] the fan’s attachment back to him or her.”²⁶⁰

So if SEC fandom can therefore be considered an imagined community, it should inherently have finite, if elastic, boundaries.²⁶¹ But how in the global tool of the internet can boundaries be delineated using online data? Is the internet “seducing us toward technological immersion and away from our placed lives”?²⁶² No; as Poorthuis et al. remind us, “information always has a geography, [and it] helps us define how we understand and create places.”²⁶³ Rather, when studied spatially, internet data can show trends of globalization or place-based patterns. Because imagined communities are perceived to exist by their inhabitants, they reflect vernacular regions when mapped. So, when the imagined community is based on geography to begin with, related internet data can give deeper insights into that geography. Southeastern Conference football fandom is based on Southern identity, a vernacular idea rooted in a regional geography. Therefore, internet measures of this place-based imagined community can in turn add an additional attribute by which we might examine the imagined community spatially. There is a great capacity for technology to help the facilitation and continued construction of limited, geographically-based imagined communities that are by nature vernacular regions. So, in short, internet data is appropriate for the overall assessment of delineating the SEC fan region.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 180-181.

²⁶¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (New York: Verso, 2016), 7.

²⁶² Stephen Doheny-Farina, *The Wired Neighborhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), xii.

²⁶³ Ate Poorthuis, Matthew Zook Taylor Shelton, Mark Graham, and Monica Stephens. “Using Geotagged Digital Social Data in Geographic Research,” *Key Methods in Geography*, ed. N. Clifford, S. French, M. Cope, and S. Gillespie (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, 2016), 1.

Conclusion

The internet represents an accessible medium by which a fan can express, maintain, and even identify with his or her fandom. It is therefore a useful source for information that when examined spatially is “fundamental to the study of human geography.”²⁶⁴ Fans can expand their expression of membership in a fanbase to the internet; collectively, fans construct imagined communities of fandom. Spatial data concerning these fan-based imagined communities can better help understand the character of fanbases and the limited nature of vernacular region.

These concepts are practically implemented here by the study of Google search terms. Search terms examined here included SEC-wide term rather than ones referring to individual teams, but collective conference fandom is useful to study in the overall context of SEC fandom. The results showed Alabama and Mississippi as the strongest states with Tennessee, Arkansas, South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, and Kentucky in a second tier. A third tier exists with Missouri, Florida, Oklahoma, Texas, and North Carolina. Kentucky is notably in the second tier, while Texas is in the bottom of the third tier. Virginia failed to make the third tier. These state-level measures of SEC fandom will be considered in the overall assessment of the SEC fan region. No significant Twitter or Facebook primary data was available for the present study, but such data would be valuable if it were procured as social media allows for another direct internet connection between the fan and his or her fanbase.

Alumni Associations

In his study on Auburn football fandom, Orion Stand-Gravois identified a

²⁶⁴ Ate Poorthuis, Matthew Zook Taylor Shelton, Mark Graham, and Monica Stephens. “Using Geotagged Digital Social Data in Geographic Research,” *Key Methods in Geography*, ed. N. Clifford, S. French, M. Cope, and S. Gillespie (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, 2016), 1.

“relationship between institution attendance and fandom.”²⁶⁵ He then spatially examined the location of current and former undergraduate students of Auburn University as a predictive attribute of fandom. For the purposes of the study, he assumed all alumni and students mapped were fans. This assumption was based on the notion that alumni “exhibit extraordinary interest in...collegiate sports...which is seldom if ever even approached by the ordinary fan in other” areas of fandom.²⁶⁶

After discussions with the Alumni Association at the University of Tennessee, it was clear that it and offices like it were not going to release anonymous residential data on alumni to an outside source. Therefore, the alumni chapters or clubs were used as surrogate data for the more specific residential locations of alumni with the premise that the clubs/chapters will only exist where there is enough of an alumni member base to support it. And because of the link between institutional attendance and collegiate fandom, this data can contribute to a better understanding of SEC fandom.²⁶⁷

Data & Methods

Each institution in the Southeastern Conference has an alumni association connected to it. These associations operate by dividing itself into clubs or chapters geographically; any alumni wanting to join the association does so through the nearest club or chapter. A list of these chapters is listed on the associations’ websites that usually correspond to a city. Each of these chapters was manually searched for in Google Earth and saved under the school it corresponded to.²⁶⁸ When the club or chapter name did not correspond to a city but rather a region, more information was sought out to better

²⁶⁵ Orion Michael Stand-Gravois, “A Geographical Investigation of Football and its Fans at Auburn University,” (Unpublished Master’s Thesis: Auburn University, 2012), 87.

²⁶⁶ Harry Edwards, “Sociology of Sport,” (Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press, 1973), 247.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 248.

²⁶⁸ This manual entry was performed before I learned of the concept of batch geocoding used with other point data in this study.

approximate where it was located by searching where the club-sponsored events were held or finding the different counties or cities it served. The combined data was converted from a KML format into a shapefile for input into ArcMap. The resulting point data was symbolized by team and is shown collectively.

Discussion

The map displaying alumni clubs of the SEC show clusters of chapters within many states within the SEC footprint.²⁶⁹ Urban centers both within the SEC footprint and around the country are popular hotspots for clubs to exist. The metropolitan regions of Atlanta, GA; Dallas, TX; Nashville, TN; Tampa, FL; and St. Louis, MO are particularly popular hosts for chapters. The majority of the chapters serve communities within the SEC footprint.

Many universities focus their efforts on servicing the largest metropolises where a high number of alumni live. For example, most alumni associations have nation-wide networks that support chapters in major cities outside of the South. However, the variability in service comes within the states of the SEC footprint. The University of Arkansas for example has far fewer alumni associations in Arkansas than Texas A&M does in Texas. This is not a reflection of a massively larger alumni base for the Aggies, but rather the University of Arkansas has structured its alumni association chapters differently with a more centralized, urban-centric model. Arkansas' chapters service a larger area each while Texas A&M has more chapters that cover smaller areas each. Similarly, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville's alumni chapters tend to service alumni within a wide radius of each epicenter while the University of Alabama has an alumni club in a great many of Alabama's counties.

²⁶⁹ Appendix 9.

Inconsistency is the resounding theme with this alumni club data. A representative from the Tennessee Alumni Association noted that chapters in specific areas cater to the alumni who live there specifically and therefore may operate differently than its counterparts within its own alumni system; a vibrant chapter and membership numbers depends on leadership within each chapter. Membership is also contingent on membership fees; just over half of the SEC alumni associations require annual dues to be paid to join, but a good number do not require this fee to join.

This variability of structure directly affects the geographic analysis of alumni by measuring clubs and chapters. It means that the number of clubs cannot simply be counted the same across all 14 teams to discern a consistent picture of SEC alumni locations; each alumni association is structured differently. So when studying joint data, for instance, we cannot assume that Auburn has a vastly superior alumni association to that of South Carolina simply because it has more clubs within its home state, nor can we assume that clubs are equally as active or populated with members across the board. This data is still valuable to examine however when approximating alumni residential locations because despite the variability, each alumni club exists due to some sort of demand for and grassroots operation of it. Because of the exceptional link between alumni and fandom for their alma mater, this is worthwhile data to include in the composite measure of SEC fandom. Furthermore, representatives from multiple annual funds noted that the annual funds at their institutions did not work with their donation offices. Therefore, alumni clubs offer an additional, distinct route for SEC fans to express their fandom.

Conclusion

A strong relationship exists between institutional attendance and athletic fandom; therefore, mapping alumni presents a valuable geospatial attribute of fandom

for the present study.²⁷⁰ However, residential data of SEC alumni could not be gleaned, so the locations of alumni clubs or chapters from across the conference were mapped as a surrogate for its more precise counterpart. Data was collected online and mapped using point vector data to examine the spatial dispersion of these clubs. Urban areas across the United States and spaces within the SEC footprint were the most popular locations for alumni clubs. Within this data exists a great variability among the different alumni associations in their structure of club organization and even among the clubs themselves, and this results in different spatial patterns for each team that are not consistent when aggregated on a map. However, this is still a good approximate measure of fandom because clubs exist where alumni are, and alumni are “entrenched” fans of “collegiate athletics.”²⁷¹

Merchandise

Merchandise are branded objects designated for sale. The likely consumer of merchandise is the person who feels a connection between him or herself and the brand associated with the merchandise being purchased. This makes sense: if you were to see a woman walking down the street wearing an LSU hoodie, you would receive the message that she supports the Tigers. This woman has made the concerted decision to pay for a branded item that in turn brands herself as a fan of LSU when she wears it. By donning the hoodie, she expresses her fandom to others. You receive this message not only because you associate the logo on her chest with her personhood, but you also acknowledge that there was a monetary transaction that occurred first that allowed her to brand herself. This is why merchandise sales are such a compelling attribute of

²⁷⁰ Orion Michael Stand-Gravois, “A Geographical Investigation of Football and its Fans at Auburn University,” (Unpublished Master’s Thesis: Auburn University, 2012), 87.

²⁷¹ Harry Edwards, “Sociology of Sport,” (Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press, 1973), 248.

fandom: it is a two-fold expression because consumers first give up an item of value, money, to in turn receive an item to place a team's logo on themselves, their cars, or their lawns. Merchandise presents a capitalistic expression of fandom that does not require the same level of monetary exchange as season ticket sales or donations do and is therefore more widely accessible to the general public. For these reasons, merchandise was examined as a pertinent attribute of fandom.

Data & Methods

In order to effectively collect data on SEC merchandise sales, consistent data across the conference for all 14 institutions was needed. While many outlets online and offline sell merchandise that a fan would consume, a consistent source supported by all SEC universities is a campus bookstore. Each university has a bookstore that serves as the central hub on campus for the sale of merchandise. Therefore, studying sales from each of these 14 bookstores would provide a consistent way of measuring merchandise sales across the conference.

Unfortunately, only one of the 14 bookstores provided data. The VolShop on the campus of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville participated in the study. The figures for the bookstore's merchandise sales were collected by requesting anonymous zip-code level data for the confidentiality of buyers. Data was given for the year 2014. Only sales corresponding to merchandise are represented in the results. The VolShop sells textbooks, classroom supplies, and general convenience store items along with merchandise, but only fan-specific merchandise such as clothing, collectibles, car and lawn accessories, etc. were included in the data to more accurately assess fandom. Only the VolShop's online merchandise sales were included because those are the sales with geographic data attached; in-store purchases simply are made within the bookstore. Each sale was counted as one entry because data on quantity of items bought or dollar

amount attached to those items was not given.

Discussion

The results of the VolShop's 2014 online merchandise sales demonstrate the importance of the Tennessee state border.²⁷² The majority of the sales come from within the Volunteer State, though they are not constrained only to Tennessee. There are large clusters of sales in North Carolina, the Atlanta, GA metropolitan region, and Huntsville, AL to a lesser extent. There are sales close to every other SEC school also, but other out-of-state patterns are difficult to discern. This data reflects a similar pattern found in the one displayed by mapping Tennessee Foundation donors in 2014. The dispersion of 2014 single-game ticket sales covers more zip codes than does the VolShop data. While it has been argued that merchandise data is more accessible than donations or ticket sales, this analysis would seem to contradict this conclusion. However, it is important to remember that the VolShop is only one of the many sources where Tennessee merchandise can be purchased. This map presents only a piece of the entire story of Tennessee merchandise sales in total.

This data could not be used in the overall assessment of the spatial extent of the SEC fanbase because of its limited nature. Only data from the VolShop was collected. Attempts were made to procure data from other campus bookstores around the SEC, but this proved to be difficult for a variety of reasons. The University of Alabama's Supply Store declined the request data citing customer privacy as the primary concern. Another difficulty stemmed from 7 of the 14 institutions' partnership with Barnes & Noble College. Rather than a private, 100 percent university-owned entity like the VolShop, schools like LSU and Vanderbilt have integrated their campus bookstores with Barnes &

²⁷² Appendix 10.

Noble Booksellers which oversees the operations and sales of university merchandise and textbooks. After discussion with a representative at the Barnes and Noble store at the University of South Carolina, I realized that the chances of obtaining customer data for an undergraduate research project from a corporate office in New York City were quite slim. An attempt was made to contact Barnes & Noble College in New York City; no response was ever given.

Briefly, another source became a possibility: Fanatics.com. This is a very large online retailer that sells sports merchandise from both professional and NCAA teams. A centralized organization where consistent data could come from would be ideal for assessing differences between fanbases and delineating fan region boundaries. Initially, there was a possibility for a relationship with Fanatics.com, but a representative eventually declined the offer citing customer privacy. However, Fanatics.com is obviously interested in sports consumer geography; data from the retailer was used to create a state-by-state winner-take-all map of College Football Playoff merchandise sold for either Clemson (ACC) or Alabama in both the 2016 and 2017 national championship games.²⁷³ The results prove to be interesting, and the changes between the years are even more intriguing. For instance, in 2017, every state within the SEC footprint (besides South Carolina, Clemson's home state) had more sales for Alabama. This includes Florida and Georgia which are also within the ACC footprint. North Carolina and Virginia, states with Power 5 teams only in the ACC, went to Clemson.

While data cannot be used in the present macro-analysis, it would have constituted a valuable addition to the overall assessment. This attribute goes beyond simple capitalism in its importance; it revolves around consumer values. Lee et al. found

²⁷³ Appendix 11.

that “consumer values...elicit consumptive behaviors” of athletic merchandise.²⁷⁴ The act of buying a LSU hoodie is more significant than simply its result of the consumer donning the garment to reinforce her fandom to herself and to express it to others; rather, the act is the product of her values as a consumer. That person who purchases merchandise does so from a set of ideas she holds dear that influenced the exchange of the valuable commodity of money for the branded hoodie that allows her to feel closer to her fandom by expressing it to all who see her. When considered on a large scale, this becomes significant. Most everyone in the SEC stadiums seating 60,000 to 100,000 people wear merchandise, and certainly those away from the spectate also wear branded clothing and own branded items. An aggregated geography of this accumulation of capitalistic expressions of fandom could be very powerful indeed.

Conclusion

Merchandise sales can be examined as an attribute of fandom because it involves the consumer giving away an item of value (money) to in turn brand themselves or their cars with their team’s logo to express their fandom to others. The structure of merchandise sales in the United States is decentralized with no one source, so on-campus bookstores for each of the 14 SEC universities and Fanatics.com were both proposed as sources for data. Only the University of Tennessee’s VolShop participated; it gave anonymous zip code data on online merchandise sales for the 2014 calendar year. When examined spatially, the data showed the importance of state lines, proximity to other SEC institutions, and metropolitan regions as hotspots of VolShop sales. The results mirrored the pattern of the Tennessee Foundations’ 2014 donations. This data

²⁷⁴ Donghun Lee, Galen T. Trail, Hyungil H. Kwon, and Dean F. Anderson. "Consumer Values Versus Perceived Product Attributes: Relationships among Items from the MVS, PRS, and PERVAL Scales." *Sport Management Review* 14, no. 1 (2011), 89.

provides only a glimpse into the potential of merchandise data in approximating fan regions and therefore will not be used in the macro analysis of the delineation of the SEC fan region. However, merchandise sales are still affirmed to be a valuable way of measuring fandom because they result from the deeply held values of the consumer and further work express his or her fandom.

License Plates

Vanity license plates, like merchandise designated for cars, are a way in which fans can express their fandom through the branding of their vehicles. The citizen who orders a license plate bearing the logo of a particular team probably feels a connection between him or herself and the represented institution. This is an extension of the branding idea just presented in the context of merchandise by using a branded license plate, the driver expresses his or her fandom to others. Other drivers receive this and assume that the driver is a fan of the team shown on the license plate. Because of the power of branding to express fandom, license plates are examined here as an attribute of fandom.

Data & Methods

Data was collected by examining the department of transportation websites of every Southern state and many surrounding states to see where SEC vanity license plates were offered to citizens. It was checked for accuracy by going to each SEC alumni association's website that promotes the license plates. Data was manually entered into a Microsoft Excel sheet, converted into a table in ArcMap, and joined to a state polygon layer to create a choropleth map showing all SEC states. The data can be examined spatially either by team or by the conference's totals.

Discussion

The results of this study reflect the variability among state department of

transportation vanity license plate policies.²⁷⁵ For Kentucky, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Florida, states that only offered a license plate for one SEC school, no out-of-state schools regardless of conference are available; anything higher than a score of one is therefore impossible. Texas on the other hand seems to have a very loose policy of what institutions can be represented on its license plates. In Virginia, special petitions must be submitted with a pre-paid application in order for a vanity license plate to be accepted by the commonwealth's department of transportation. The great variability in state policies leaves this data somewhat inconsistent.

However, it is still beneficial to study the results. For states that allow out-of-state institutions to be represented, Missouri has the fewest at two teams offered (Missouri and Arkansas). Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina all unsurprisingly have a dense count with four to six teams represented in each. Tennessee and Georgia outdo their neighbors however with a total of 9 teams represented. Texas tops them all by including all of the SEC schools except for Vanderbilt (which offers a plate only in the state of Tennessee). Outside the SEC footprint, North Carolina (6), Maryland (5), Virginia (4), and Washington DC (2) all have an SEC license plate presence. Washington DC and its surrounding suburbs in Maryland and Virginia host a large number of people who immigrate there for a variety of reasons. A reoccurring pattern of donations and ticket sales in the DC suburbs might suggest that while they may not be in the majority, there is still a substantial number of SEC fans in the nation's capital. Additionally relying on ticketing and donation data, North Carolina's abundant options for SEC license plates could reflect the diversity of teams represented in the Tar Heel State in that data. This examination of license plates here shows perhaps the strongest data for an SEC presence

²⁷⁵ Appendix 12.

in traditionally Southern states outside of the SEC footprint.

It is important to remember that this is not a measurement of how many license plates have been ordered by citizens but rather an examination of where they are offered. The data may look very different if it were measured in that way. However, each of the license plates offered by the departments of transportation are available because of the concerted efforts of someone either in the government or community. A choice was made to produce the license plate to meet a demand that existed. Citizens then opt for an SEC vanity plate if they consider themselves fans and want to brand their car to express that fandom to others.

Conclusion

Vanity license plates are another branding attribute of fandom that allows the fan to label his or her car to express fan loyalty. Data for this attribute was collected from various state-level department of transportation websites and cross-checked with each of the SEC's alumni association webpages. It was uploaded to and analyzed in ArcMap. The results show that SEC license plates are available everywhere within the SEC footprint and in North Carolina, Maryland, Virginia, and Washington DC. The patterns varied by state due to codes on which institutions could be represented on plates and how much public demand existed to spur the plate's production. While this data only shows the potential for the acquisition for a team's license plate rather than the final tallies of plates ordered, it is still a valuable attribute of fandom to examine because demand for the plates preceded their availability; where a plate is offered, there was a sizable number of fans that lived in that state that incited production.

Athlete Production

Studying athletic player production refers to examining athletes hail from and go to play their sport; one studies places and how many players it "produces." This concept

was a key theme in early sports geography through the methodology of John Rooney in his study of American football.²⁷⁶ This method of studying sports geography has been implemented to study a wide variety of regional dimensions in sport.²⁷⁷ Today, player production is often used as the basis for the popular definition a collegiate team's territory.²⁷⁸ This idea is based on statistics that suggest that the majority of football players stay in their home state to play college football.²⁷⁹ An earlier discussion on this view in this paper pointed out the weaknesses in using player production as a comprehensive measure of a fan region but still maintains that it is a valuable attribute to consider here because of existing literature and the cyclical connection between player production and fandom.

Data & Methods

Preceding the 2016 college football season, Jake Sharpless wrote an article for the blog *Rukkus* that mapped from where every NCAA Division I FBS player came.²⁸⁰ Additional analyses on distance traveled to attend institutions and states that produced the most players were performed. Included in this online article was a Google map that showed spatially the origin places of all NCAA players. Data for the 2016 rosters of each SEC team was extracted from this map directly to Google Earth and converted into a feature class for integration into ArcMap. This point vector data was then symbolized by team.²⁸¹

²⁷⁶ John F. Rooney, "Up from the Mines and Out from the Parries: Some Geographical Implications of Football in the United States," *Geographical Review* 59, no. 4 (October, 1969).

²⁷⁷ John Bale, *Sports Geography* 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2003), 69-76.

²⁷⁸ *Sporting News* (January 2012), 36.

²⁷⁹ Harold McConnell, "Southern Major College Football: Supply, Demand, and Migration of Players," *Southeastern Geographer* 23, no. 2 (November 1983): 94.

²⁸⁰ Jake Sharpless, "Mapping Every College Football Player's Hometown," *Rukkus*, last modified 15 August 2016.

²⁸¹ Appendix 13.

Discussion

Much of the existing academic literature has studied the regional dimensions of player production. That is, polygons are studied rather than point data. Rooney and then McConnell study player production through the functional regions of states within the United States. This approach is more useful for examining both aspects of player production: where players come from and where they go to. This study will only focus on the former.

Jake Sharpless' point data presents a much more precise measure of player production. The data show that many players come from urban areas; Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Miami, and Birmingham are prominent areas for recruiting. Atlanta is a hotbed for player production; the majority of the State of Georgia's 247 SEC players come from the state's capital metro region. Also, supporting the notion that "players tend to stay at home," there are recruits from the town of every SEC institution that go to their hometown school.²⁸²

Overall, most player production data reflects the SEC footprint well. However, the area of western Texas, a culturally less Southern region and closer to Texas Tech than Texas A&M, shows few SEC recruits. Of the exceptions, the most obvious is the state of Ohio. 46 SEC players in 2016 came from Ohio which is more than Arkansas, South Carolina, and Kentucky. The University of Kentucky has established a recruiting base in Ohio as the majority of those 46 play in Lexington. It is interesting that in a state where basketball is emphasized, its flagship university must import most of its players from a state that is one of the nation's top leaders in "gross production of college football

²⁸² Harold McConnell, "Southern Major College Football: Supply, Demand, and Migration of Players," *Southeastern Geographer* 23, no. 2 (November 1983): 94.

players.”²⁸³ Another non-SEC state to mention is North Carolina which exported 33 players to SEC schools with the Universities of South Carolina and Tennessee as leaders. The data is noticeably urban as an interstate layer in a GIS would show the connection between many of these points; Greensboro, Charlotte, Raleigh, Wilmington, and other major Tar Heel State cities are featured.

It is important to remember that this data, like other presented here, is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. These patterns show only one year of SEC rosters (although four classes of players are represented). However, with the great emphasis on recruiting in popular media, sports geography literature, and the administration of collegiate sports, the inclusion of this geographic data into the overall study of an SEC fan region is appropriate. The cyclical nature of fandom and player production is a large reason why. The tradition of football in the South and Southern institutions’ abilities to recruit good talent do not exist independently of each other, but rather a relationship exists. Fans are energized with high-quality play on the field. Fans’ support of the team is strengthened alongside a rise in the team’s athletic standing. Recruits look for strong programs to join; when good players go to strong programs, the fans remain energized and express their fandom through the other attributes discussed above. Player production is a classic and pertinent measure of sports geography regions.

Conclusion

Player production is a classic topic of study in sports geography, and recruiting often informs modern popular notions about collegiate sports geography. Jake Sharpless’ 2016 study on mapping college football players’ hometowns provided the data for this attribute. When studying the vector point data, the patterns tend to reflect the

²⁸³ John F. Rooney, “Up from the Mines and Out from the Parries: Some Geographical Implications of Football in the United States,” *Geographical Review* 59, no. 4 (October, 1969): 482.

SEC footprint with the addition of southern Ohio and North Carolina and the exception of western Texas. Urban centers are popular origin places for players. This cross-sectional data is useful in informing the geography of the SEC fan region because of the scholarly and popular emphasis put on it and its cyclical relationship with fandom.

Delineating the SEC Fan Region: An Aggregation of Attributes

The claim made by Poorthuis et al. that “the study of the geographies of information [is] fundamental to the study of human geography” is taken seriously here. There is an important component of this study that seeks to qualitatively understand the nature of Southern identity and its relationship with college football fanaticism through literature and colloquial discussions with people I met during field work. Another important part of this understanding however is assessing the geographies of these two ideas. The spatial qualities of ideas give a visual understanding to the phenomenon at hand. Maps are tools the discipline of geography uses to study these phenomenon, and, in the words of Carl Sauer, “the conveying of ideas by means of maps is attributed to us as [geographers’] common vocation and passion.”²⁸⁴

Geographic information systems, GIS, are the modern manifestation of cartography. If maps are “the language of geography,” then GIS is the contemporary dialect of the discipline.²⁸⁵ Cultural geography can utilize current geospatial technologies to enhance the understanding of people, their values, and the cultural landscape of our world. Quality data exists that can lead to valuable maps. GIS has been an instrumental tool for this discussion of regional identity and college football fandom. It was used to map each attribute of SEC fandom independently and to aggregate these attributes together to delineate the borders of “SEC Country.”

Some have questioned the necessity and goodness of delineating borders in cultural and regional geography. However, this study builds on the rich tradition of vernacular studies that maintain that “identifying and understanding...vernacular

²⁸⁴ Carl O. Sauer, “The Education of a Geographer,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 46, no 3 (September 1956): 289.

²⁸⁵ Ibid, 289.

regions is a justifiable, even necessary, pursuit.”²⁸⁶ Part of apprehending “the major social and geographical realities” of the modern South includes examining the boundaries of the region.²⁸⁷ SEC football, like Southern place names or collards, is a force that helps maintain and express Southern identity.²⁸⁸ To understand a region, its attributes must be examined separately. Here, a measure of regional identity through the mapping of SEC football is provided to help “explain a host of social...phenomena and provide a deeper understanding of...regional identification.”²⁸⁹

Methods

To examine a more thorough and comprehensive space of SEC football fandom, the attributes discussed above of the locations of ticket holders, donors to the athletic departments, radio station affiliates that broadcast football games, social media and internet activity, university alumni associations, purchases from university bookstores, states that offer SEC vanity license plates, and player production were aggregated into a single map. Using GIS, a region considering all of these attributes of fandom was delineated to suggest boundaries cores, peripheries, and boundaries of “SEC Country.” A GIS methodology was implemented rather than a simple eye test to approximate this region so the results can be as objective as possible. While there will always be authorial bias inherent in cartography, this study seeks to objectively discover an approximated border quantitatively rather than approach the map with assumptions that primarily influence the delineation. GIS is an apt tool for this objective spatial analysis.

²⁸⁶ Wilbur Zelinsky, “North America’s Vernacular Regions,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70, no. 1 (Mar, 1980): 2

²⁸⁷ Ibid, 2

²⁸⁸ Edward H. Davis & John T. Morgan, *Collards: A Southern Tradition from Seed to Table* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2015).

Derek H. Alderman and Robert Maxwell Beavers, “Heart of Dixie Revisited: An Update on the Geography of Naming in the American South,” *Southeastern Geographer* 39, no. 2 (November 1999).

²⁸⁹ Christopher A. Cooper and H. Gibbs Knotts, “Declining Dixie: Regional Identification in the Modern American South,” *Social Forces* 88, no. 3 (March 2010): 1084.

The distinct challenge of carrying out this analysis resulted from the diverse datasets that needed to be aggregated. Attribute data exists in point, small (zip-code level) polygon, and larger (state level) polygon forms. In order to synthesize the data, the methodology of Poorthuis and Zook was amended and appropriated.²⁹⁰ For macro-aggregation, all data was converted into polygon formats. For the existing polygon data, no action was taken. Point data was aggregated up into vector, rectangular polygon grids. The data were not aggregated at the zip-code, county, or state level because these administrative units can vary greatly in size; instead, alumni association and player production data were aggregated “to a regular lattice of rectangles...in which every area has the exact same size [to solve] this problem.”²⁹¹ While hexagonal grids are visually pleasing, rectangular grids serve the purpose of providing point data with an arbitrary spatial area to which they can be joined.²⁹² Radio station point data were not handled in this way; radio signals are thought of in terms of a radius. While stations of all kinds of signal strengths are represented in the data, an estimated average of 50 miles was used as the radius to buffer the points into circular polygons.

Each separate polygon layer’s internal boundaries were dissolved which resulted in larger polygons. Then, those polygons that were contiguous and contained the 14 SEC campuses were kept; the rest were excluded. This was done in order to obtain a contiguous region for each attribute that stemmed from each SEC school. Rather than using discontinuous polygons to identify a region as Terry Jordan-Bychkov did in his study on the Upland South, this study seeks to identify one approximated contiguous region where the data show a border to “SEC Country.”²⁹³ There were no significant

²⁹⁰ Poorthuis and Matthew Zook, “Small Stories in Big Data: Gaining Insights from Large Spatial Point Pattern Datasets” in *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research* 17, no. 1 (2015).

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁹² Appendix 14.

²⁹³ Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov, *The Upland South: The Making of an American Folk Region and*

pockets of fandom outside the South, so the analysis here focuses on the region closest to the SEC footprint.

Generating contiguous layers was easier for some attributes and difficult for others. Handling license plate and Google search data on a state level was relatively simple. Any state offering an SEC license plate was included in the dissolved layer, and all states were contiguous and stemmed from SEC campuses. Likewise, states in the top three out of four tiers for Google searches on “SEC Football” and “Southeastern Conference” were included in the dissolve layer; all these states were also contiguous and contained the SEC campuses.

Point data that were converted to polygon layers were considered in the same way. Because of the overabundance of players and alumni associations populating each grid upon their transposition to polygons, a threshold of two points per cell was required for the square to be considered in the macro-aggregation. Qualifying cells were dissolved, and those cells contiguously connected to an SEC campus were kept. An outside line around these polygons was drawn to obtain the significant region for that attribute. There were qualifying cells outside these regions that were left out, and there were cells within these regions that did not qualify. The outer boundary of the contiguous polygons was an objective quantitative way to decide which areas were to be included or excluded without author discretion. Radio polygon data was dissolved in a similar manner. There only a few outlying Texas A&M affiliate stations in the southern and western regions were not included as they were not contiguous to the larger radio region.

Ticketing and donation data at the zip code level was treated in the same way as

the rectangular lattice data, but zip code polygons are much smaller and have more jagged borders. Contiguous polygons stemming from the SEC campuses were bounded. There were zip codes within the boundaries that did not have a donation attached to it, and there were zip codes outside of the boundaries that did. But again, this was a way to quantitatively and objectively bound attributes of fandom. Throughout this step for all attributes, the essence of their spatial qualities were preserved for a meaningful macro-analysis.²⁹⁴

This macro-analysis consisted of the geographical indexing of the contiguous polygons for each attribute of fandom. Much like Terry Jordan-Bychkov did with the Upland South, this step consisted of the layering of different qualifying attributes and synthesizing them all into one map.²⁹⁵ When all the contiguous polygons were layered, they were merged into one large, overlapping polygon feature class.²⁹⁶ A geoprocessing technique was then utilized to examine these overlaps and count how many polygons overlapped at each point on the map. The result showed the boundaries of all the contiguous polygons for each attribute and where the most attributes were found at one location. This layer showed overlaps with a score of one to seven based on how many attributes overlapped at any given space.²⁹⁷

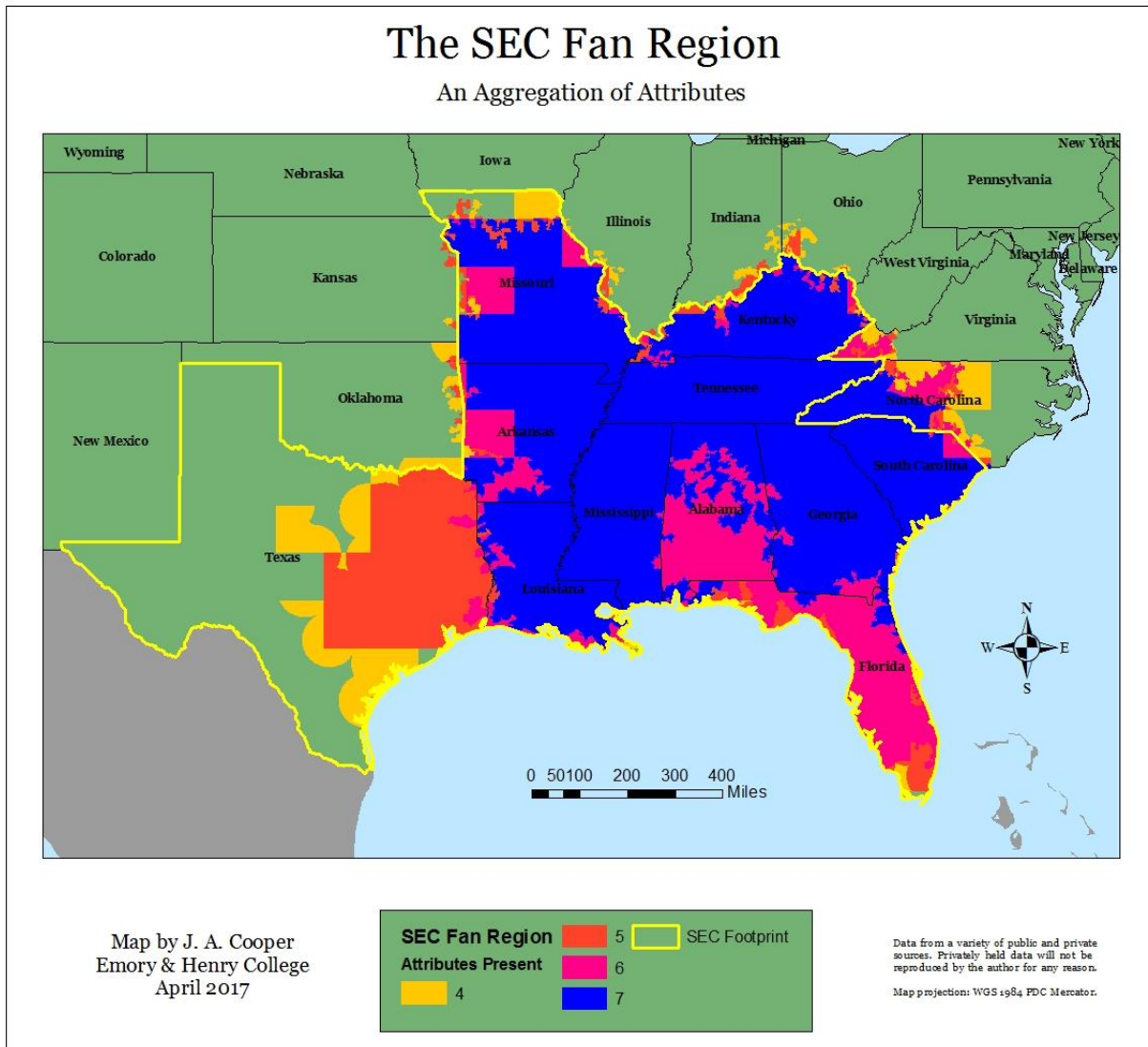
This indexed layer was symbolized to include those areas with a score of four or better; in order to be included in the final map of “SEC Country,” an area had to be associated with a majority of the attributes studied here. The resulting map shows the “core” of SEC fandom, and its outer boundary is taken here as the cumulative result of this study: the border of the SEC fan region.

²⁹⁴ Appendix 15.

²⁹⁵ Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov, *The Upland South: The Making of an American Folk Region and Landscape* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Center for American Places Inc, 2003), 84.

²⁹⁶ Appendix 16.

²⁹⁷ Appendix 17.



Discussion

Comparison of SEC Country to the SEC Footprint

SEC Country, the space where the majority of attributes of fandom studied here occur, most strongly shows a correlation with state borders. The fan region's outer borders closely follow state lines in many places: Arkansas' western, Missouri's western and eastern, and Kentucky's northern border are all prevalent. This helps to support ideas about the power of state borders and state identity in connection to collegiate

football fandom.²⁹⁸ These particular borders reflect ideas presented in primary interviews; both Missouri and Arkansas officials emphasized that their institutions are the only Power 5 schools in their states, and officials at Kentucky discussed an anti-Ohio sentiment in the Southern identity of Kentuckians that helped to set them apart from the “North.”

Away from these state borders, many states are seen in the heart of SEC Country. Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, and South Carolina contain no borders to the fan region, the majority of the state scores a seven out of seven on the index of attributes of fandom. These states are solidly SEC territory. The data suggest that large portions of southern Alabama and Florida are still SEC territory but lack a perfect score of seven. This is purely due to the lack of season ticketing data from the universities of Alabama, Florida, and Auburn. Based on annual fund donation data alone, it is safe to predict that if ticketing data were included, much of the same area that shows a score of six would have a perfect score of seven. After all, either Auburn or Alabama have been SEC football champions for six of the past seven years. An Auburn official claimed that both schools epitomized SEC football and its rabid fandom. Popular literature consistently uses the two schools’ success and rivalry to explain the phenomenon of SEC football.²⁹⁹ The state is included in every measure of “the South” in vernacular literature. Birmingham hosts the head offices for the conference and “is the place where regional identity, indeed Southernness, is made incarnate.”³⁰⁰ The Heart of Dixie comfortably fits within SEC Country.

²⁹⁸ C.C. Roseman & Fred M. Shelley, “The Geography of Collegiate Football Radio Broadcasting,” *Sport Place* 2, no. 2 (1988).

²⁹⁹ Paul Finebaum and Gene Wojciechowski, *My Conference Can Beat Your Conference: Why the SEC Still Rules College Football* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 194.

³⁰⁰ Edward H. Davis & John T. Morgan, *Collards: A Southern Tradition from Seed to Table* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 11.

The State of Florida is a more complex case. Gator Booster data suggests that much of the state would be covered by season ticket sales, but to what extent the data would cover the state is difficult to assess. There are many pockets of lower-scoring areas in Florida than Alabama, and there could be a variety of reasons for this. There are several professional teams in the state which are agents of competition identified by officials at many schools. The state also hosts Florida State and Miami, two ACC schools discussed later. And geographically, there is significant “cultural variation in Florida.”³⁰¹ While doubts and questions are raised by a lack of ticketing data, the majority of the state’s six out of seven score and the probable perfect score for many areas helps conclude that Florida is solidly within SEC Country.

The SEC fan region is particularly interesting to examine in places where state borders and the conference’s footprint do not influence the fan region’s borders as much. This is most apparent in Texas where the entire western half of the state is not included in the SEC fan region. A significant limitation to the examination of Texas is that Texas A&M’s 12th Man Foundation did not provide season ticketing or annual fund donation data. The absence of this data is critical to this state that is only partially included in the vernacular South and hosts one of the SEC’s newest institutions. Additionally, the idea of the state being a part of SEC “territory” was vital to the conference’s addition of A&M for its fertile recruiting ground and lucrative television market. The accuracy of that mode of thinking is difficult to assess without the critical zip-code level data of Texas A&M.

However, the existing data, while a bit sketchy to base solid conclusions on, still provide some insight into the spatial qualities of SEC fandom in the Lone Star State.

³⁰¹ Ary J. Lamme III & Raymond K. Oldakowski, “Vernacular Areas in Florida,” *Southeastern Geographer* 22, no 2 (November 1982): 99.

There is a presence of SEC fandom in the urban centers of Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin certainly. While they were not contiguous so they were not included in the larger analysis of data, zip codes around each of these cities showed season ticket sales and annual fund donations to several SEC schools even in the absence of Texas A&M data. The vast majority of season ticket sales and donations from other schools mapped in Texas are within the border of SEC Country; this gives more credence to the border's route through the Lone Star State. The area included within this border fall within the areas of Eastern and Central Texas. The former is connected to "the traditional culture...of the Deep South" and the latter to "Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Appalachia."³⁰² This Appalachian-like region in Texas is referred to as "the Upland South." In many ways, the SEC's moves in 2012 to acquire Texas A&M and Missouri seem to be moves to embrace this Upland South, the part of the larger South Jordan-Bychkov argues leads the South to exhibit a dichotomous "dual character."³⁰³

This embracing of the Upland South can also be seen in Missouri. The majority of the state is well within SEC Country, but, like Jordan-Bychkov's assessment of the Upland South, the northern part of the state is not included. It is indeed interesting to consider this in light of a Tiger Scholarship Fund official's claim that northern Missouri was more like Iowa in its Midwestern qualities. Do these qualities preclude a higher level of SEC fandom? It certainly is interesting that for states within the SEC footprint that have full data assessed in this study, Missouri is the only one to have a significant part of its area absent from SEC Country.

Other areas where the footprint differs from the fan region result because

³⁰² Terry G. Jordan, "Perceptual Regions in Texas," *Geographical Review* 68, no. 3 (July, 1978): 302.

³⁰³ Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov, *The Upland South: The Making of an American Folk Region and Landscape* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Center for American Places Inc, 2003), 3.

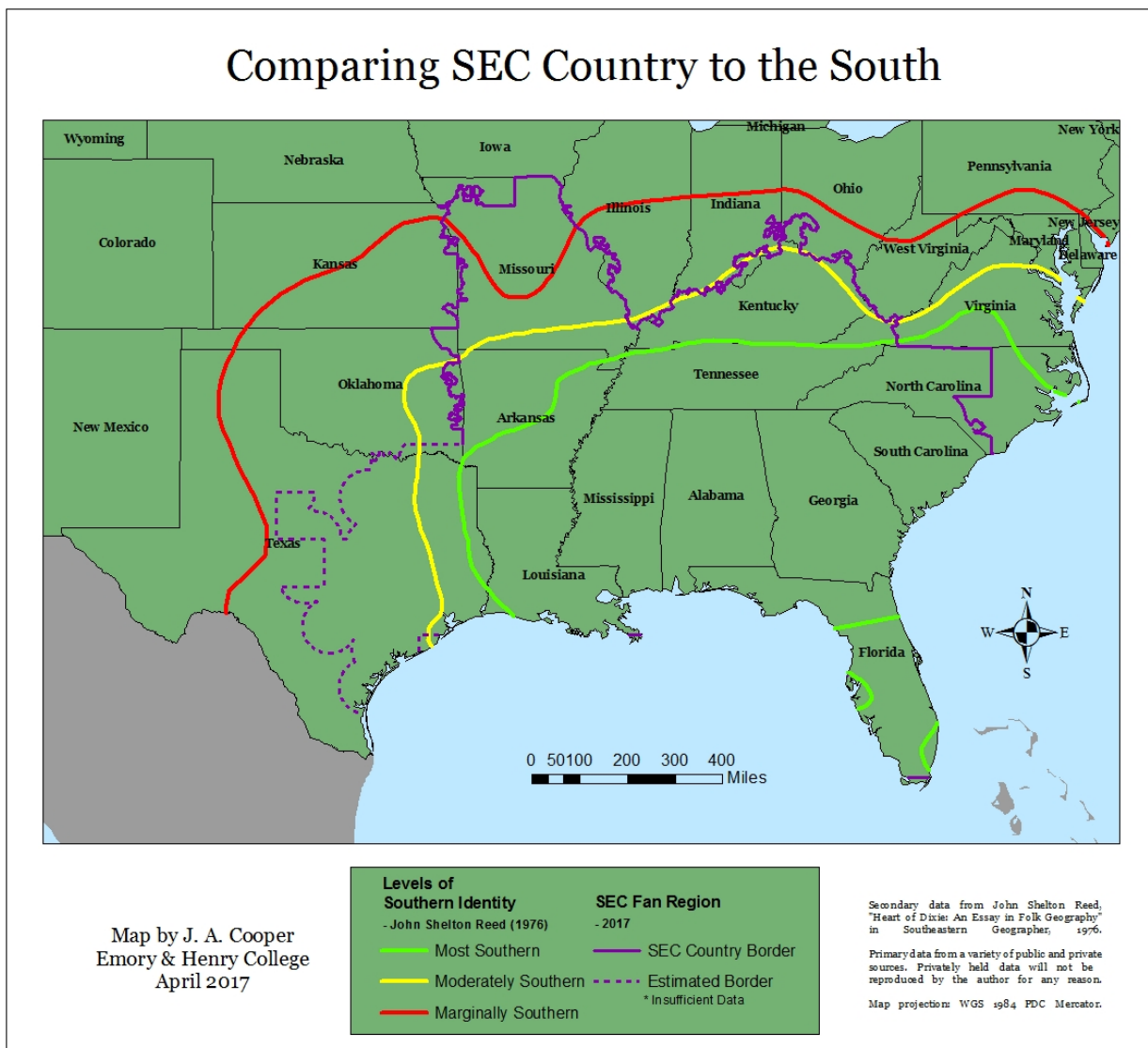
fandom spills over state borders rather than fails to meet them. The most prominent example of this is North Carolina. While outside of the SEC footprint, much of the western part of the state scores a perfect seven out of seven in the index of fandom. This area is both Appalachian along the Tennessee border and urban in cities like Asheville and Charlotte, the headquarters of the SEC Network. The border extends into the urban areas in the central part of the state around the Greensboro and Raleigh-Durham metropolitan regions. These areas showed a diverse base for donating to SEC annual funds; no one team was represented, though Tennessee and South Carolina appeared the most. Perhaps the presence of SEC fandom in these urban spaces is a result of post-graduate migrations from SEC universities to the Research Triangle. And, as with any city phenomenon, more people offers a higher chance for the attributes to appear; this data is not normalized for population. SEC Country stops before going farther west to Rocky Mount or Wilmington. It also does not extend north into Virginia.

Virginia is not totally excluded from the SEC fan region, however; its far southwest corner shows a significant presence of fandom attributes. Unlike North Carolina, Virginia did not appear on the Google search map, so all areas of the commonwealth were not able to score a perfect seven. However, many areas of southwest Virginia score six out of seven. The pocket of SEC fandom reaches out but stops just before the town of Wytheville, perhaps halted by the increasing proximity to Virginia Tech.

While the northern border of Kentucky mirrors the border of SEC Country fairly well, there is an exception with Cincinnati. This city sits directly across the Ohio River from northern Kentucky and is only an hour-and-a-half drive from Lexington. It is no surprise then that season ticket holders and donors to the K Fund are found in Ohio from Cincinnati up to Dayton. The state of Ohio was not included in the significant areas

of Google searches or license plates which renders the Cincinnati scores lower than its northern Kentucky suburbs, but the ticket sales and donations coming from the Queen City push SEC Country into Ohio. The southern Indiana suburbs of Louisville also see the expansion of the SEC fan region north of the Ohio River. Again, a relatively short drive to the Kentucky campus and higher population of the area may describe why ticket sales and donations are found in this space.

Comparison of SEC Country to the Vernacular South



Because college football fandom is a significant attribute of Southern identity and

the SEC is such an influential institution in the maintenance of that identity, it is useful to compare the delineated SEC fan region to the vernacular South as identified by John Shelton Reed. As previously mentioned in the literature review, there have been many updates to Reed's 1976 study that show the fluid and longitudinal nature of regional identity. "Heart of Dixie" may not present the most contemporary assessment of the spatial South, but its "trail-blazing" methodology in vernacular regional geography has earned the study respect. Therefore, the South measured in Reed's original study is compared here to SEC Country.

A hypothesis in this study was that because SEC football fandom is an instrumental part of Southern identity, the spatial qualities of the vernacular South and the SEC's fan region would mirror one another. The results only partially support this hypothesis. Reed identified his middle line of the South with an S score of 0.35 as the "best single choice for a boundary line, if a single one had to be chosen."³⁰⁴ That line most closely mirrors the SEC border from Cairo, Illinois to Southwest Virginia. The SEC fan region stretches across the Kentucky border (with the urban exceptions just mentioned) and continues along the West Virginia border until Bluefield where it abruptly turns south. Reed's S=.35 line also follows this pattern but continues to follow the Southern border of West Virginia until it covers most of Virginia; all of North Carolina is also included in this region while the SEC fan region excludes much of the eastern part of the state. No one will deny that both Virginia and North Carolina exhibit distinctive Southern qualities, but it is worth noting that James Shortridge categorized Virginia and North Carolina in an "Atlantic coast transition zone" that showed signs of moving away from a Southern identity in favor of an Eastern identity that is still distinct

³⁰⁴ John Shelton Reed, "The Incredible Shrinking South." in *Surveying the South: Studies in Regional Sociology* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press), 57-58.

from the North but is not the South.³⁰⁵ Other areas of South Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee are also part of this region, but Virginia and North Carolina exhibit the most territory in this zone. Interestingly, all of these states but Tennessee have Atlantic Coast Conference institutions within their borders, and they're in the Atlantic coast transition zone.

West of Cairo, Illinois, Reed's $S=.35$ line extends across the southern Ozark region of Missouri before entering Oklahoma. However, as much of this study has shown, collegiate football fandom is spatially influenced by state borders. Missouri Tigers' fandom draws the SEC fan region north into the Show Me State. Missouri is the most problematic area of the SEC fan region in arguing for a geographical influence on Southern identity because central and northern Missouri (including Columbia where Mizzou is located) are not even included in Reed's most broad sphere of Southern identity where $S=.10$. Robert Crisler's proposed vernacular region of Little Dixie in central Missouri that was more Southern in nature seems a distant memory; more recent vernacular geographers have placed the state in the Midwest.³⁰⁶ Outside of the Mississippi Delta and Ozarks regions, it is hard to make a case that Missouri football fandom that is so connected with its mostly Midwestern state contributes to Southern identity. A Tigers Scholarship Fund official's note that Mizzou fans would remain obstinate and not conform to the style of SEC fandom prevalent throughout other fanbases would suggest that membership in the SEC will not help re-introduce an identity connected to the South to the state either.

Reed's line crosses into Oklahoma and covers the southeastern part of the state.

³⁰⁵ James R. Shortridge, "Changing Usage of Four American Region Labels," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no. 3 (September, 1987): 331.

³⁰⁶ Robert M. Crisler, "Missouri's 'Little Dixie,'" *Missouri Historical Review* 52, no. 2 (January 1948).

While the border of SEC fandom follows the Arkansas state line, it seems pulled into Oklahoma. The University of Arkansas' campus is only about 20 miles as the crow flies from the Arkansas-Oklahoma border, and geographic hypotheses such as central place theory and distance decay would suggest an advancement of Arkansas fandom across the border. While there is a solid fanbase for the Razorbacks in Tulsa, there was not a substantial number of qualifying attributes of fandom for the city to be included in SEC Country. On the whole, however, we see as Reed did that Oklahoma is not a Southern state, and the absence of SEC fandom here helps support this conclusion.³⁰⁷

Reed's $S=.35$ line extends down through eastern Texas to the Gulf of Mexico, skirting the Houston metro along the way. College Station, home of Texas A&M, is excluded from this measure of the South. Even after examinations of Texas' vernacular regional qualities by Reed, Meinig, Jordan, Zelinsky, and Shortridge, the state "maintains its reputation for complexity" in this study of fandom.³⁰⁸ The Southern-ness of Texas is difficult to assess, and due to lack of data, so is discerning the spatial extent of SEC fandom in the Lone Star State. Administrators like R. Bowen Loftin at A&M encouraged the school's admission into the SEC in 2012 in part because they believed "A&M would be a great cultural fit in the SEC," something that has not been said about Missouri that joined the same year.³⁰⁹ After the move, Loftin notes that "SEC fans began to embrace the Aggies as a perfect addition in their league," and primary interview data supports this; most every fan and official from other SEC schools see Texas A&M as a perfect fit and love the atmosphere in College Station.³¹⁰ So while A&M's campus and its

³⁰⁷ John Shelton Reed, "The Heart of Dixie: An Essay in Folk Geography" *Social Forces* 54, no. 4 (Jun, 1976): 930.

³⁰⁸ James R. Shortridge, "Changing Usage of Four American Region Labels," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no. 3 (September, 1987): 331.

³⁰⁹ R. Bowen Loftin and Rusty Burson, *The 100 Year Decision: Texas A&M and the SEC* (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2014), 82.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

major urban centers of fandom in San Antonio, Austin, Houston, and Dallas are not included in Reed's vernacular South, perhaps because the Texas "A&M community went absolutely crazy with 'SEC fever,'" there is a move within the mental maps of Aggies to associate their state more with the South.³¹¹

The Problem of the ACC

The idea of the Southeastern Conference as the specific entity that promotes a type of fandom that reinforces Southern identity raises the question of what to do with the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the other Power 5 conference that supports teams within the South. The ACC was originally constructed as a geographic region; the SEC split from the Southern Conference in 1932 along the geographic line of the Appalachian Mountains, and the eventual ACC charter members remained the Southern Conference until 1953 when another split occurred.³¹² The ACC stretched from only South Carolina to Maryland and consisted of traditionally southeastern schools.

After a much more fluid history of membership than the SEC, the ACC now stretches from Miami to Boston. Its footprint is not contiguous. Its name is not indicative of what schools belong to the conference; are Pittsburgh, Louisville, and Notre Dame truly in an Atlantic coast area? Furthermore, like every Power 5 conference except for the SEC, the conference's footprint is not reflective of any particular cultural region like Rooney and Abbott assumed before the turn of the century. Significant outliers keep it from reflecting even a broad "East" region. However, it is evident that the ACC is no longer as Southern as it once was. The most telling evidence for this is its addition of Notre Dame, Pittsburgh, Syracuse, and Boston College. Other indications might be the

³¹¹ Ibid, 157.

³¹² Melvin Henry Gruensfelder, *A History of the Origin and Development of the Southeastern Conference* (Unpublished Master's Thesis: University of Illinois, 1964), 78.

gradual move north of the conference's basketball tournament from traditional Greensboro, NC to Washington DC in 2016 and then Brooklyn, NY in 2017.

The ACC is still a problem for the argument for the SEC's prevailing influence on Southern identity because there are people in the South who cheer for Southern ACC teams. North Carolina has a rich tradition of collegiate basketball excellence; while western North Carolina is a part of SEC Country, there are likely many more ACC fans throughout much of the state. Virginia too is exclusively ACC by footprint, and part of the state is included in the South. Many Virginia Tech and Virginia fans living in the commonwealth would consider themselves Southern.

ACC schools exist within the SEC footprint too. Miami and Georgia Tech are urban examples of this. Miami, a historically excellent college football program, is a private school situated in the southernmost part of Florida, an area that was included by John Shelton Reed in the South in the South 1976, which dropped out of the region in his update in 1988.³¹³ The current area is greatly influenced by Hispanic culture and no longer exhibits Southern cultural qualities. Georgia Tech exists in Atlanta, Georgia, the site of the annual SEC football championship game and host to SEC donors to all schools studied here. While the city hosts Georgia Tech, a representative from the Bulldog Club hypothesized that there would be even more Georgia fans there because of UGA's culture of being the state's school while Georgia Tech has almost a private-school feel with many out-of-state students. And while Georgia Tech was a charter member of the SEC originally, the ACC school does not even win its own zip code in the *New York Times'* study on college football fandom.³¹⁴ This is a telling sign that Georgia Tech may not

³¹³ John Shelton Reed, "The Incredible Shrinking South." in *Surveying the South: Studies in Regional Sociology* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press), 58.

³¹⁴ Tom Giratikanon, Josh Katz, David Leonhardt, Kevin Quealy, and Mark Tracy, "N.C.A.A. Fan Map: How the Country Roots for College Football," *The New York Times*, last modified 3 October, 2014.

support the rabid college football fandom associated with the Southeastern Conference.

Perhaps the most difficult schools to recon with in the ACC that do support rabid fanbases are Florida State and Clemson. An official at the University of Arkansas said that Clemson and Florida State are the closest programs to SEC football as one can get in the ACC due to their tailgating culture and the perception of football gameday as an event. Additionally, both are public state institutions solidly within the South, support passionate fanbases, and are successful on a national stage. Florida State and Clemson won the national championship for the 2013 and 2016 seasons, respectively, and did so by beating the SEC champion of those years. Morgan and Klimasewski appropriate Florida State's success into a larger pattern of geographical dominance for Southern college football (and would most likely treat Clemson's recent victory the same way if they had published two years later), but a quick listen to the Paul Finebaum radio show or a look at banter on twitter would reveal a popular disdain for many Southerners who are SEC fans for the loss of their conference. Nevertheless, these two Southern programs have earned the respect of fans across the SEC and nation as being formidable football forces.

Florida State is located in Tallahassee, Florida's capital and a part of the panhandle region that has already been shown to be more Southern than peninsular Florida.³¹⁵ Culturally, it is very akin to an SEC program; indeed, Paul Finebaum begrudgingly admits that "Florida State is an SEC team...Its football program has SEC chromosomes."³¹⁶ On Finebaum's radio show, *Orlando Sentinel* journalist Mike Bianchi echoed the host's sentiment that "Florida State is an SEC team in the ACC; they are SEC

³¹⁵ Ary J. Lamme III & Raymond K. Oldakowski, "Vernacular Areas in Florida," *Southeastern Geographer* 22, no 2 (November 1982): 100.

³¹⁶ Paul Finebaum and Gene Wojciechowski, *My Conference Can Beat Your Conference: Why the SEC Still Rules College Football* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 8.

in every way: culturally, geographically.”³¹⁷ It has a tradition of excellence on the gridiron, but the culture part makes good sense. The passion and fervor associated with Seminole football produces an atmosphere similar to one that might be found in Athens, Auburn, or Gainesville. Bobby Bowden after his retirement as longtime Florida State football coach shared with Finebaum on his show that when the Seminoles joined the ACC in 1991 partly on his recommendation to not join the SEC. Bowden acknowledged that Florida State would fit well within the SEC, but he feared that the program’s route to a national championship would be more difficult if his team had to play SEC competition weekly. Instead, he urged Florida State to join the less-competitive ACC to have fewer regular season losses. This tactic seems to have worked; the Seminoles have won three national championships since the move to the ACC.

Florida State also fosters a traditional rivalry with the SEC Florida Gators. This is not only an annual game played between Florida’s two public Power 5 schools, but it is also a geographic rivalry. The *New York Times* article on collegiate football fandom shows a sharp divide that splits the region Lamme III and Oldakowski identified as the “Big Bend” of the state that shows Florida State fandom to the west and Florida to the east. This may help explain why there are some gaps in ticket sales and donations in the panhandle of Florida for SEC teams; could Florida State be eating into the market of fandom that by a state saturation should at least show a Florida Gator presence? If so, it is the only ACC team to do this on a significant level.

Clemson is another ACC team with an in-state rivalry with an SEC team: South Carolina. Clemson has been recognized by many, even British sports geographer John Bale, as a program with a passionate following that has cultural meaning. Bale shows the

³¹⁷ *Paul Finebaum Show* 3 August 2015

particular impact of Clemson football on the cultural landscape. His discussion of Clemson football as synonymous with Clemson the town and its tiger paw logo as an “icon of a latter-day religion” certainly sounds like literature meant for SEC programs.³¹⁸ Indeed, of Clemson and Alabama’s 2016 national championship game, Ted Miller wrote that the matchup was a “glorified SEC game” and that atmosphere of “obsessive regionalism” would enrich the game.³¹⁹ He describes Clemson as “the most SEC of teams that aren’t SEC.”³²⁰ Scott van Pelt, an ESPN television personality, agreed. Preceding the same game, van Pelt told the camera that he “always found Clemson interesting for this reason: they feel the most of any ACC team like an SEC team. Part of it is geography...A passionate fanbase that most closely identifies itself with the success of its football team.”³²¹ He quoted Lewis Grizzard next by calling it “Auburn, with a lake.”

However, despite a few cases where the line between ACC and SEC is blurred, the overriding, conference-wide difference between the two is that the ACC has made little to no effort to stick to its Southern roots after 2005 when Boston College was added. The SEC has. Regional identity is an additional force in the idea of conference unity, and it is used to express regional identity in the SEC. The ACC has moved away from a regional identity and therefore lacks that unifying force. Two fans from two ACC teams can share a common identity under the umbrella of fandom, but two SEC fans can bond over both fandom and regional identities. People recognize that SEC fans’ “collective pride, unmatched by fans of any other conference, is...complicated, a phenomenon deeply woven into the cultural fabric of a region.”³²² There is a reason that the man in the

³¹⁸ John Bale, *Sports Geography* 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2003), 21.

³¹⁹ Ted Miller, “Bama vs Clemson is the CFP’s Glorified SEC Title Game” *ESPN.com* 1 January 2016.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Scot van Pelt, “One Big Thing” *ESPN* 1 January 2016.

³²² George Schroeder, “If You Have SEC Pride, Stop Rooting for Alabama.” *USA Today* 5 January

Knoxville barbecue restaurant claimed each SEC team as “all our teams.” There is a sense of belonging to two imagined communities in that statement: the SEC fan region and the South. Being an SEC fan reinforces one’s cultural, regional identity in a way that being an ACC, Big Ten, Pac 12, or Big XII fan does not. So at the end of a bowl game, fans of victorious Tigers, Bulldogs, Gators and Gamecocks proclaim their Southern pride and identity by loudly chanting, “SEC! SEC! SEC!”

Conclusion

Participating in the fandom of a Southeastern Conference football team can help one express and reinforce his or her Southern identity. The connections between SEC fandom and vernacular perceptions of the South are evident in literature, and the data presented here support that connection. This study shows evidence of “the South” as a tremendous popular idea manifested by the phenomenon of college football through the SEC. One must wonder if the SEC is one of the most powerful institutions reflecting Southern identity. What else can match it? Perhaps *Southern Living*, the Southern lifestyle magazine; it has been shown to promote a version of Southern identity to its readers and the rest of the country.³²³ The Sons or Daughters of the Confederacy may speak to a part of Southern identity too. But in terms of both dollars spent and emotions elicited, SEC football works with Southern identity in an unparalleled manner.

The geography of SEC fandom also shows that in some cases, SEC fandom reinforces and facilitates state loyalties. Much of the data seems dependent on state borders. A higher volume of fans of a team are usually found within its statewide footprint suggesting that state identity is connected to fandom of collegiate football teams. Roseman and Shelley made a similar conclusion, qualifying that this applies to “state-supported universities because of in-state tuition benefits.”³²⁴ All of the SEC schools that provided zip-code level ticketing and donation data are public schools; this conclusion therefore may only pertain to public rather than private institutions. This goes beyond simply a reduced rate of college tuition, however; there are “social relations

³²³ Tracy Lauder, “Southern Identity in Southern Living Magazine,” *Journal of Geography* 111, no. 1 (2011).

Edward H. Davis & John T. Morgan, *Collards: A Southern Tradition from Seed to Table* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 11-12.

³²⁴ C.C. Roseman & Fred M. Shelley, “The Geography of Collegiate Football Radio Broadcasting,” *Sport Place* 2, no. 2 (1988): 43.

that underline naming” as people interact with their identities.³²⁵ Cheering for a team indicates some type of identification with the state it is in, especially with the power of the popular idea of a team’s footprint.

This data helps to show how SEC football is a feature of Southern culture that helps maintain the region as the “sturdiest...vernacular region” in the United States.³²⁶ And while some modern cultural geographers doubt the necessity and goodness of delineating vernacular and regional borders, those boundary lines assessed here help to affirm “the analytical importance of regions and regionalism in American cultural geography” utilizing GIS technologies.³²⁷ The approximated borders of SEC Country help to show where this important trait of college football fandom spatially occur across the South. The data allow us to better understand where Southerners are spending their time, emotions, energy, and money on all aspects of fandom associated with SEC football.

To conclude, I want to respond to the famous Southern writer and Oxford, Mississippi native William Faulkner. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Shreve McCannon asks his Southern friend Quentin to “Tell about the South. What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all.”³²⁸ My hope is that this study has partially answered this question. But if Shreve were to ask me to tell about the South, I would summarize all that is written here and respond by telling about the black victory flag raised in Nashville and the sandstorm in South Carolina. I would tell about

³²⁵ Derek H. Alderman and Robert Maxwell Beavers, “Heart of Dixie Revisited: An Update on the Geography of Naming in the American South,” *Southeastern Geographer* 39, no. 2 (November 1999), 194.

³²⁶ Wilbur Zelinsky, “North America’s Vernacular Regions,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70, no. 1 (Mar, 1980): 8.

³²⁷ Derek H. Alderman and Robert Maxwell Beavers, “Heart of Dixie Revisited: An Update on the Geography of Naming in the American South,” *Southeastern Geographer* 39, no. 2 (November 1999), 194.

³²⁸ William Faulkner, “Absalom, Absalom!” in *William Faulkner: Novels of 1936-1940*, ed. Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1990.), 144.

tailgating in the Grove in Oxford and the deafening sound of cowbells in Starkville. I would tell tales of the Vol Navy in Knoxville and the outstretched arms and wiggling fingers of fans in Fayetteville. I would tell of the doghouse between the hedges in Athens and the tiger cage in Baton Rouge. I would tell of midnight yells in College Station and the white rock “M” in Missouri. I would tell of cat walks in Lexington and gator walks in Gainesville. I would tell stories of soaring eagles over the plains of Auburn and melodies of “Sweet Home Alabama” sung in Tuscaloosa. If Shreve asked me to tell about the South, I would say to him, “Go Big Blue” and “Anchor Down;” “Woo Pig Sooie” and “Geaux Tigers.” I would say “MIZ-ZOU” and “Gig ‘Em” along with a “Chomp Chomp” and “Go Dawgs.” I would say “Hail State” and “Hotty Toddy,” and I would loudly sing “Forever to Thee” and “Rocky Top.” And, of course, I would say “War Eagle” and “Roll Tide.”

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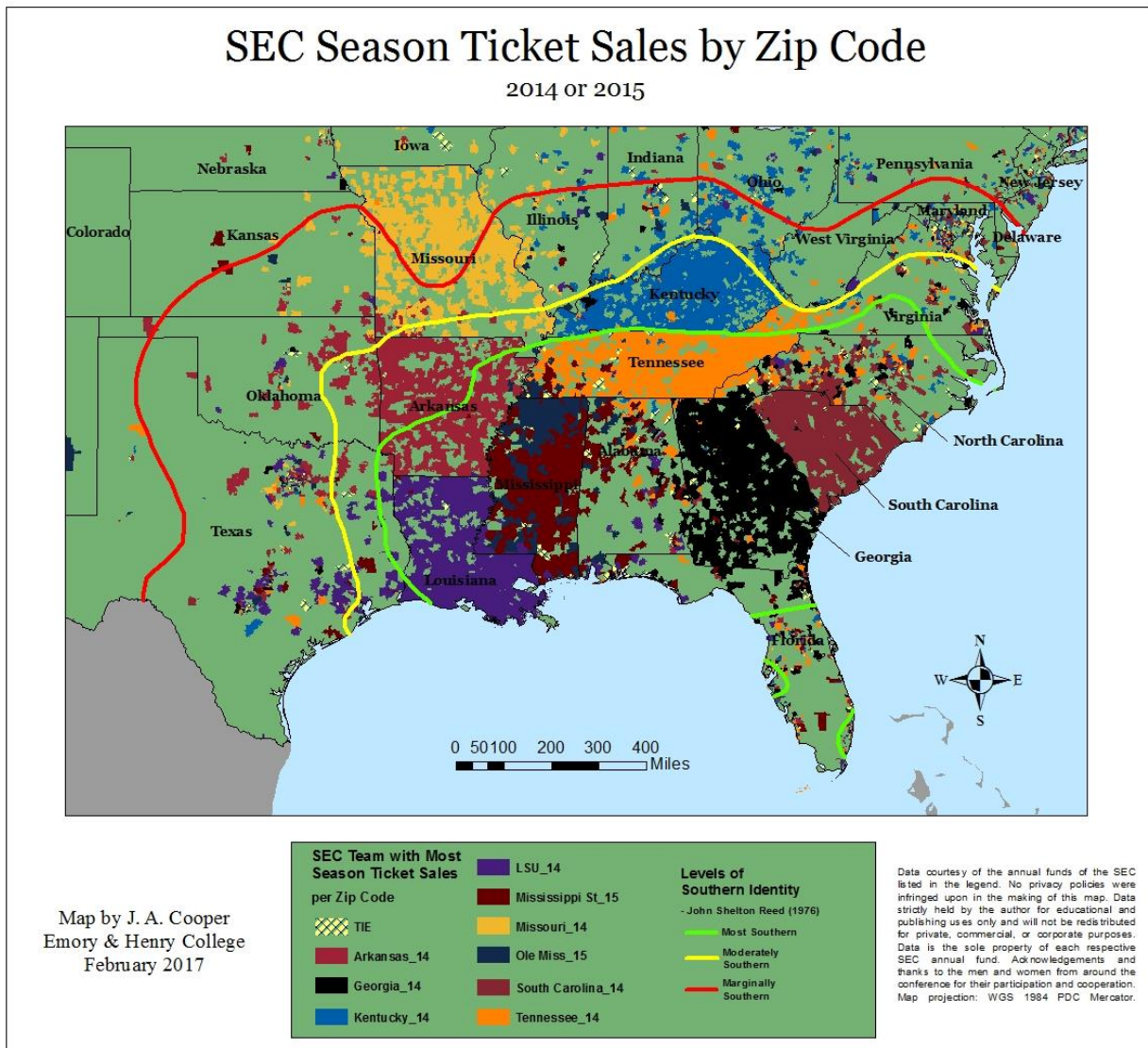
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Appendix

1.



2.

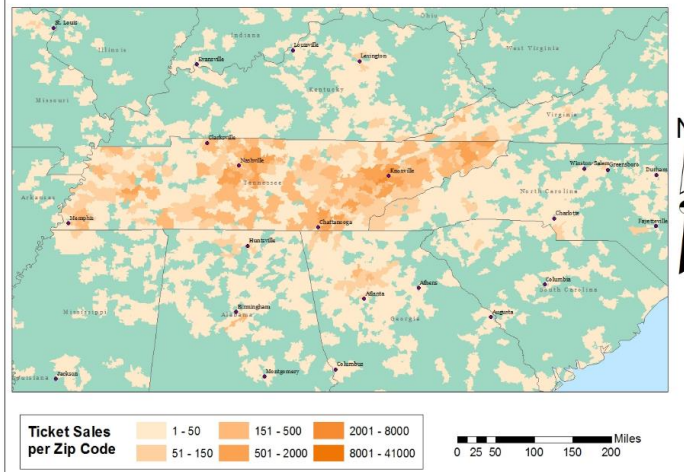


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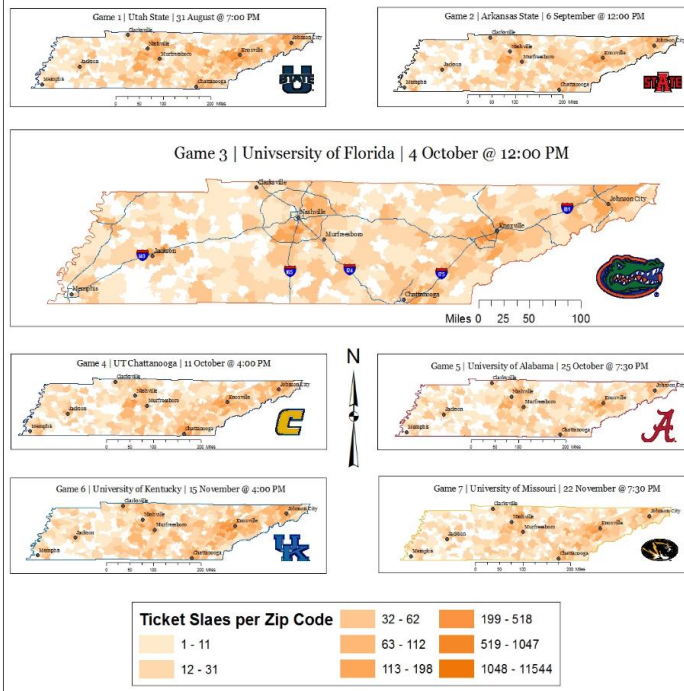
University of Tennessee 2014 Football Single-Game Ticket Sales



Total 2014 Home Single-Game Ticket Sales



Individual Game Ticket Sales



Map Drawn by J. A. Cooper
Emory & Henry College
July 2016

Data courtesy of Joe Arnone and the ticket office of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. No privacy policies were infringed upon in the making of this map. Data strictly held by the author for educational and publishing uses only and will be redistributed for private, commercial, or corporate purposes. Data is the sole property of the Tennessee Ticketing Office. Acknowledgments and thanks to Mr. Arnone and the Tennessee ticketing office for their exceptional participation and cooperation.

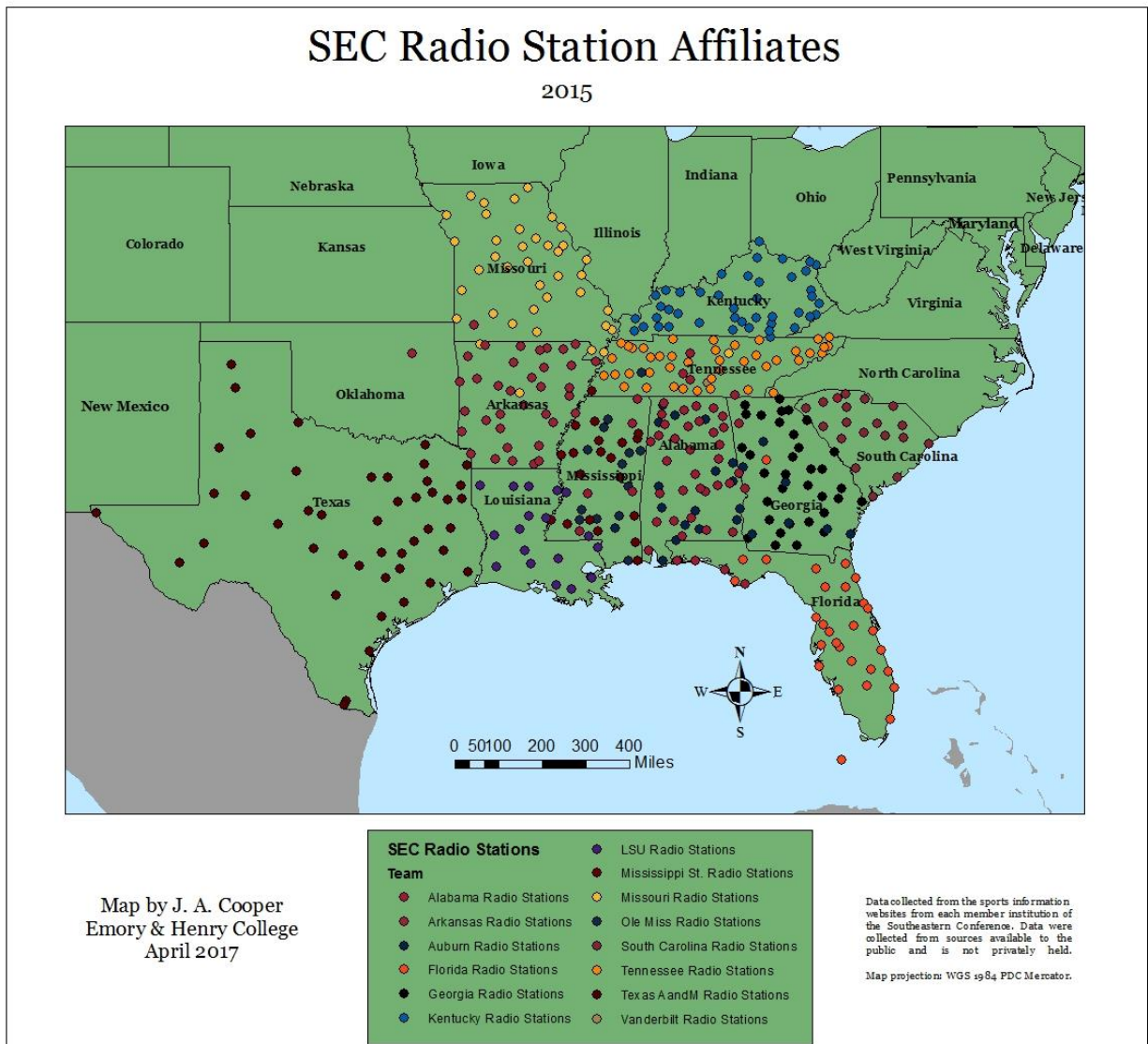
4. Auburn University's new jumbotron at Jordan-Hare Stadium. Photo by author.



5. The University of Kentucky's refurbished boxes in Commonwealth Stadium. Photo by author.



6.



7.

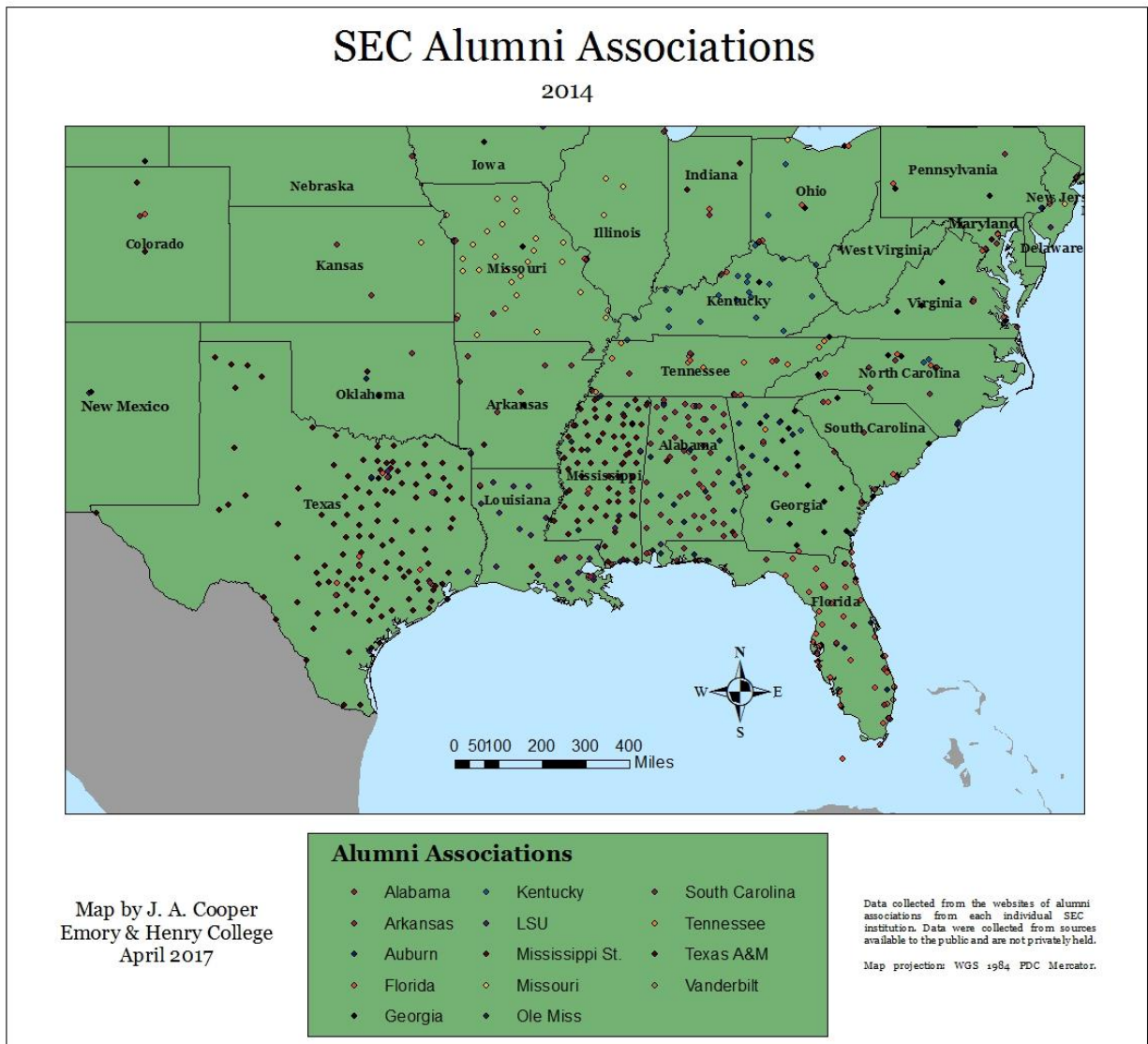
Table 1. Radio Affiliate Information by School

School	1987 (Roseman & Shelley)	2015 (Cooper & Davis)	2015 Classification
<i>Southeastern Conference</i>			
Alabama	26	53	MSC
Arkansas	-	42	StS
Auburn	68	48	MSC
LSU	-	23	StS
Mississippi St.	-	29	StS
Ole Miss	-	28	StS
Texas A&M	-	61	StS
Florida	60	37	StS
Georgia	92	44	StS
Kentucky	-	55	StS
Missouri	-	44	StS
South Carolina	45	21	StS
Tennessee	80	56	StS
Vanderbilt	20	9	WSRC

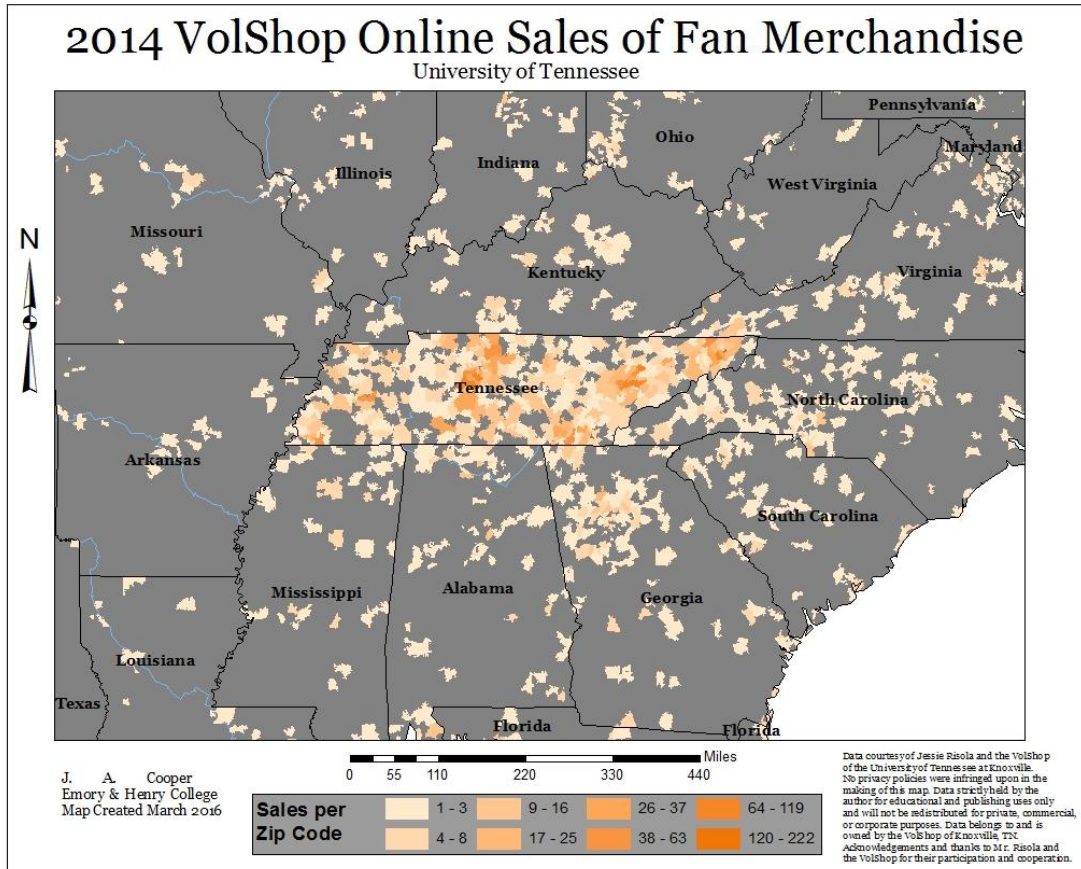
8.



9.



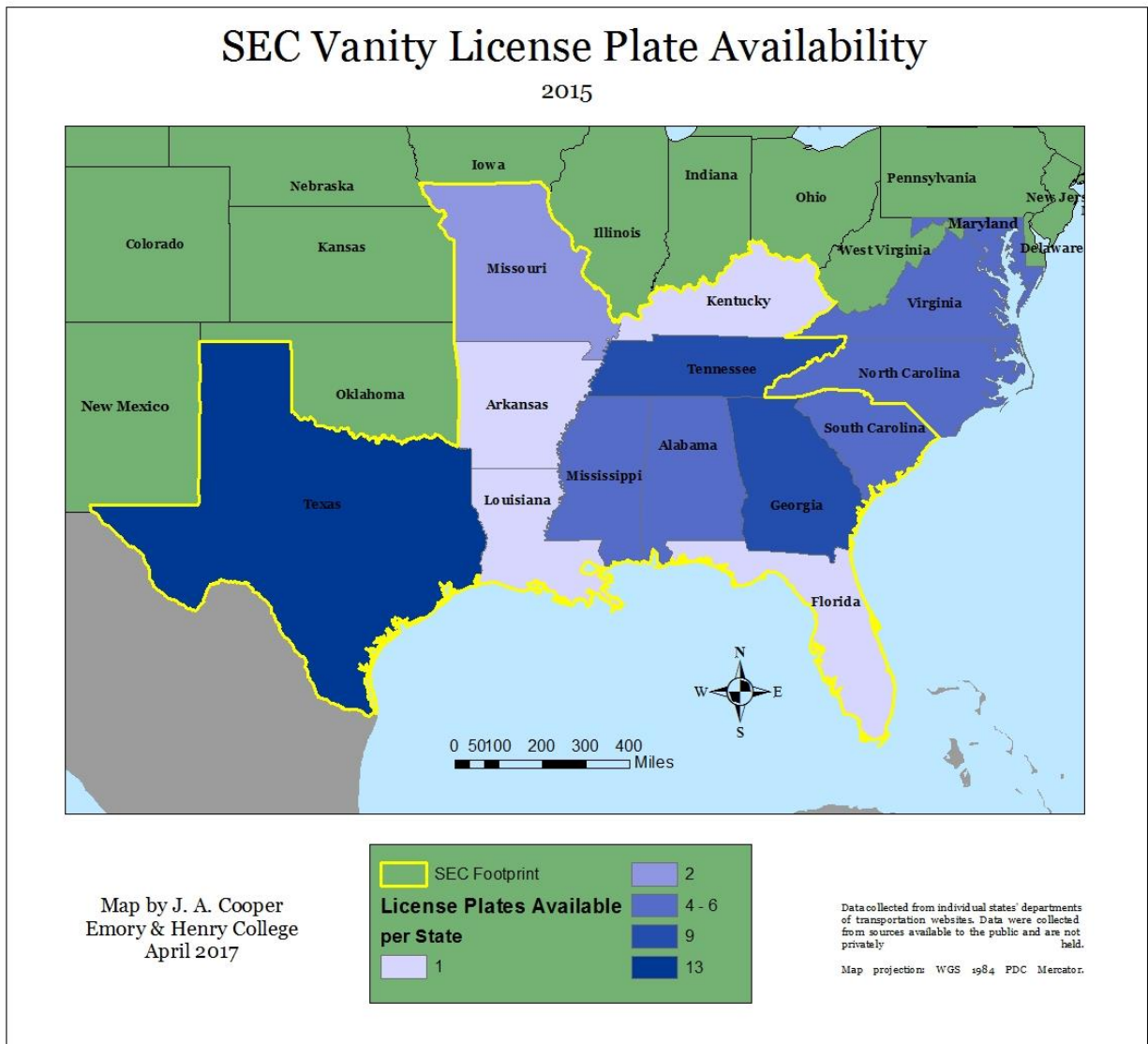
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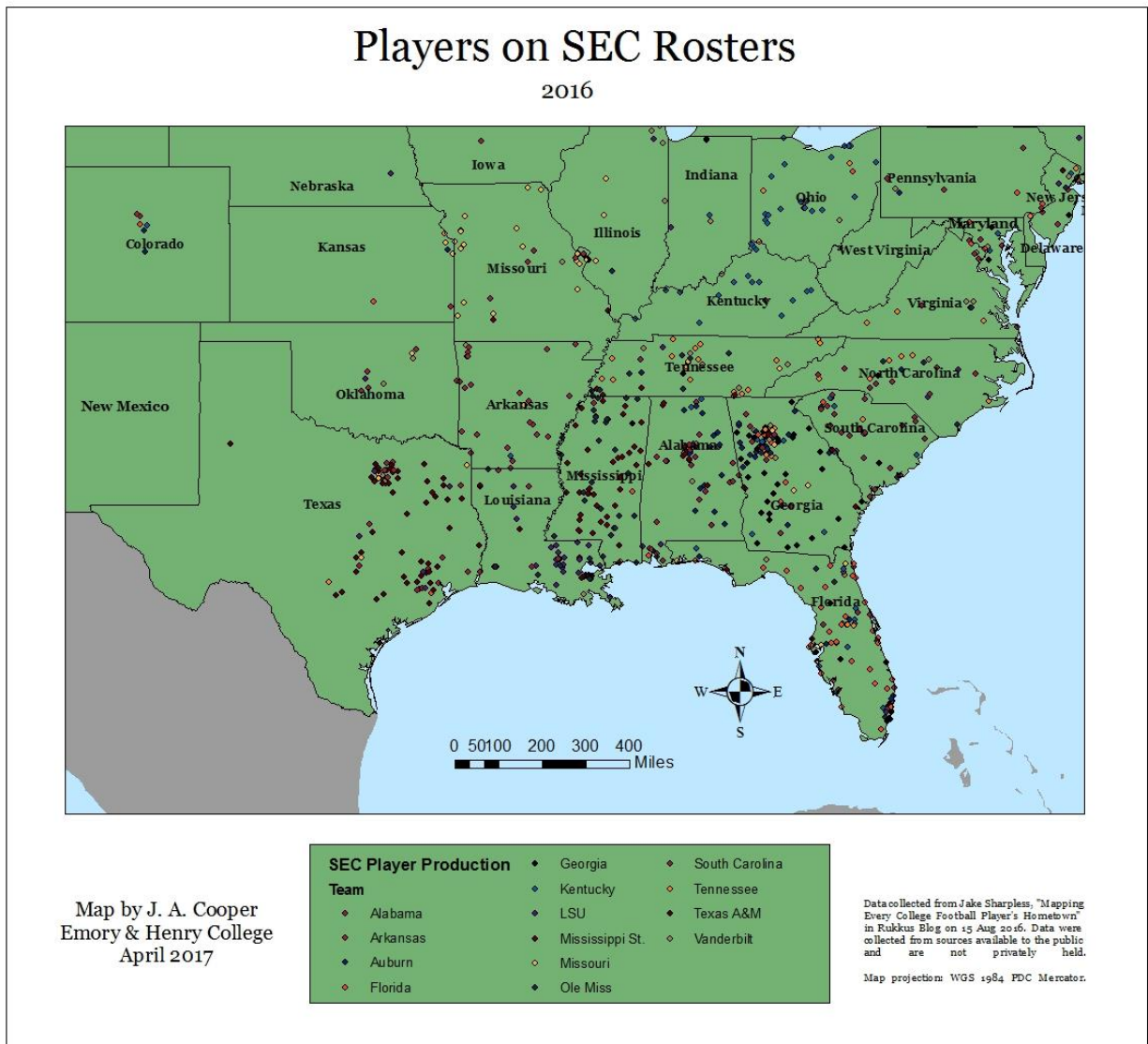
11. Source: www.fanatics.com



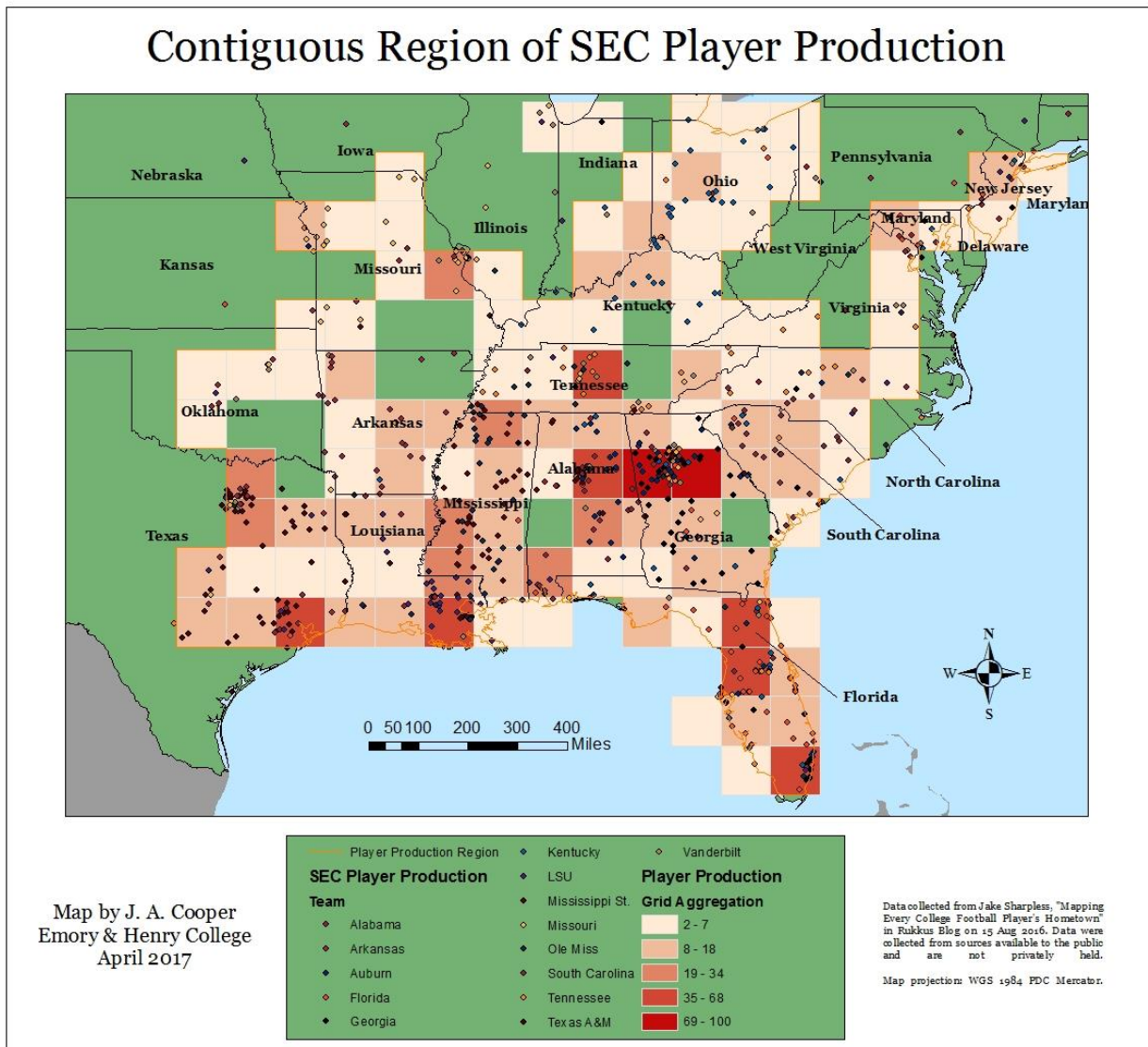
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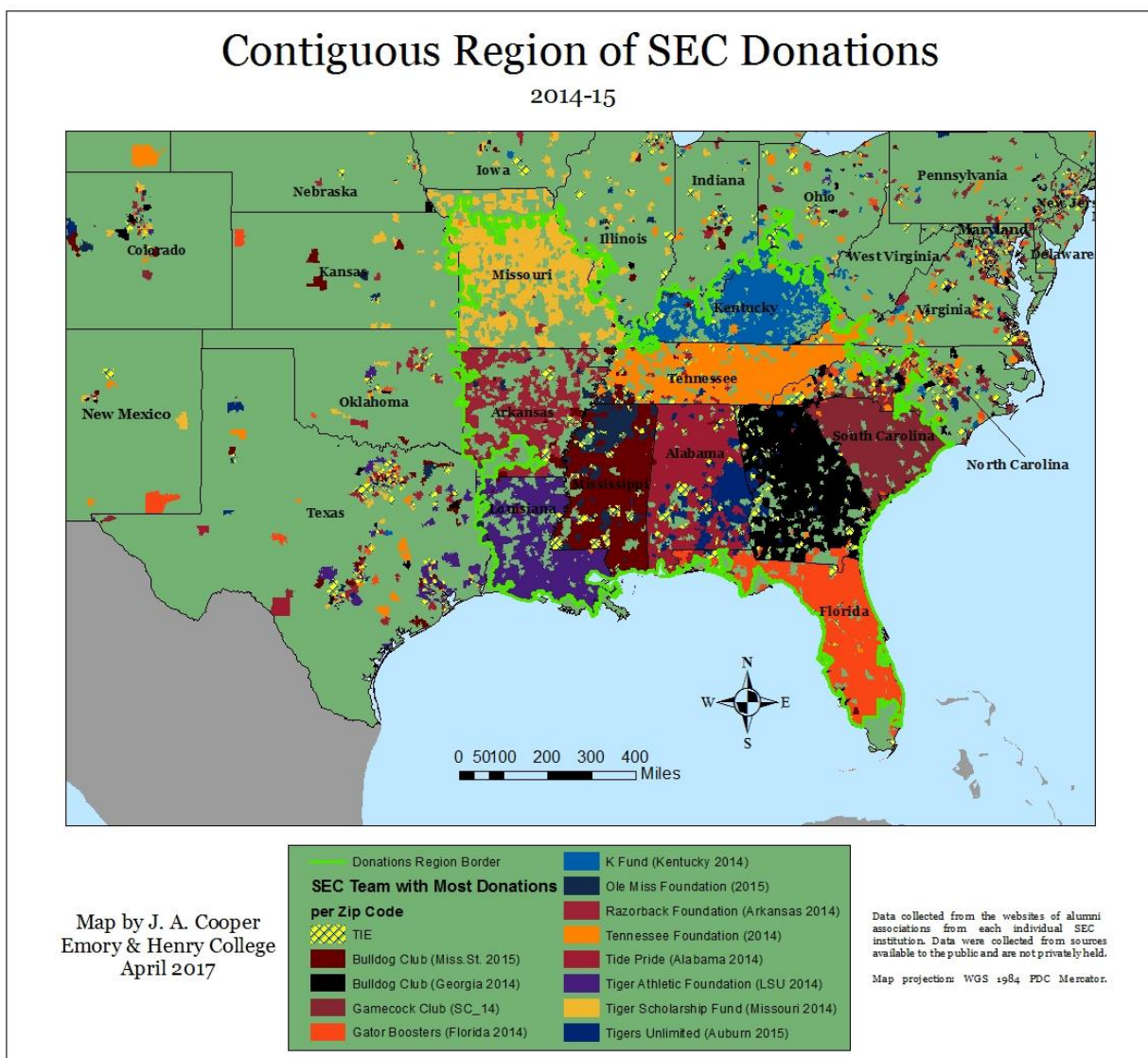
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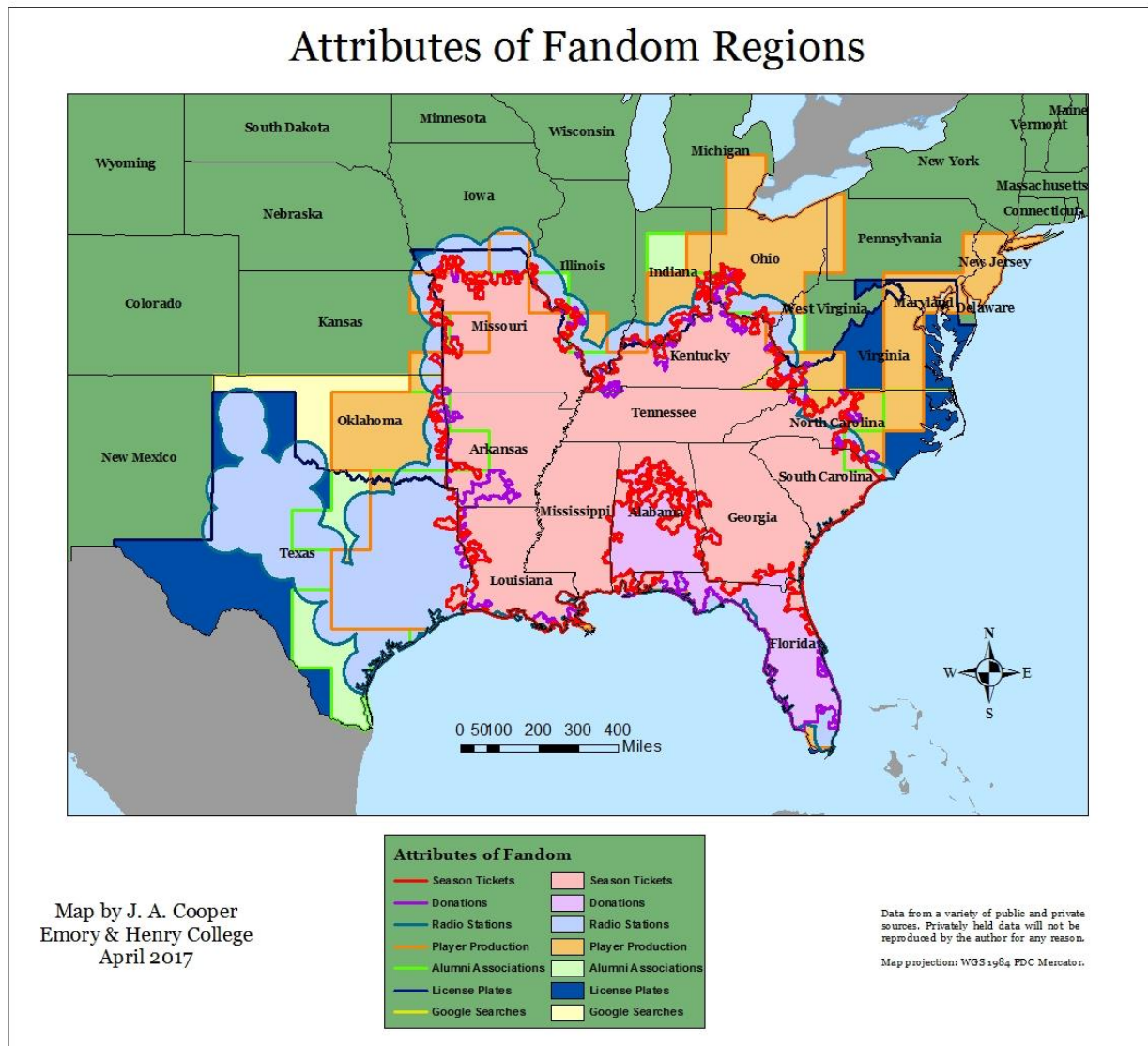
14.



15.



16.



17.

