

For better or worse, in North America, the answer to the question “Where are you from?” transmits a great deal of information, not all of it accurate. “Where you're from” is taken as an indicator of “where you're coming from.” (Garreau xvi)

Underlying this assertion is the idea that different parts of the United States and Canada have different viewpoints and attitudes about the world. They have different cultures. The core goal of this project is to identify, in a general sense, where North Americans<sup>1</sup> think they are 'from', on a sub-national scale.

The question “Where are you from?” could be answered on a variety of levels. I want to focus on large sub-national areas which I and others term 'regions'. More specifically, I want to focus on what are known as 'vernacular regions', regions which are “the product of the spatial perception of average people, the shared, spontaneous image of territorial reality, local or not so local, hovering in the minds of the untutored. (Zelinsky 1)” The project I propose will use the World Wide Web to map peoples' conceptions of these vernacular regions, compile some aggregate maps based on all submissions, and make this data available for others to study, interpret, and add to.

Some common regional names are doubtless familiar, 'New England', 'the South', 'the Southwest', 'the Midwest'. These kinds of designations are widespread in our everyday conversations, but how well-defined are these common terms? Are we all referring to the same places when we use them, or do these terms mean different things to different people? Do such demographic factors such as educational level, economic status, age, or current location, contribute to a person's understanding of region? Or, just as importantly, are people in the United States rather indifferent to regional issues?

We have many ways to talk about diversity in our country, but our geographic diversity is relatively ignored. We, as a society, have devoted much research to studying differences between people of varying sexes, ethnic backgrounds, income levels, and many other criteria. But comparatively little research has been done on distinctions between people from different areas of the country. We lack a vocabulary which can be used to shape perceptions and arguments, offer a fuller understanding of who we are as a people, and perhaps shape social policy in the ways research on other kinds of diversity has done.

The vernacular region, or just region, could be an important addition to the way we talk about diversity. I hear people talk about different regions of the country as different places, but I have heard the same terms (like 'Midwest') used to refer to such a wide array of places that I've wondered how useful they currently are. If we could build some consensus and popular awareness of where and what the regions are, they could be a much more useful way of understanding US culture.

Before delving too deeply into “How to we map regions?”, I should first attempt to substantiate the claim that regions and regional affiliation matter in the ways I have asserted. Previous research on this topic indicates that regional affiliation can be a strong influence on an individual's social and cultural values. As such, it seems that a better understanding of where regions are could contribute to a better understanding of

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<sup>1</sup>In all the reading I have done, 'North American' is used almost exclusively to refer to the United States and Canada. Most authors contend that, though Mexico is part of the continent physically, culturally it shares much more in common with nations to the south. I have no personal opinion on this subject. I am most interested in the United States. Most previous studies of vernacular regions treat the US and Canada together.

who we are as a nation and how we balance issues of diversity and unity in our country.

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, geographer Howard Odum “stressed the importance of 'regionalism' as a way to develop the nation harmoniously. (Gastil 30)” Fifty years later, Wilbur Zelinsky stated “My contention, then, is that identifying and understanding our vernacular regions is a justifiable, even necessary, pursuit if we wish to apprehend the major social and geographical realities of late Twentieth-Century America. (Zelinsky 2)”

Even more recently, in a chapter of his book *Fire and Ice* titled *Looking Within : American Diversity, Canadian Consensus*, Michael Adams examines differences between Americans and Canadians on a whole range of social values. He devotes a large part of his analysis to the study of value differences between different regions within these two vast countries. One example is especially telling. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement “The father of the family must be master in his own house”, 71% of respondents from the 'Deep South' agreed, while only 29% of those from 'New England' did. So on a basic social question such as patriarchal authority, two regions of our country vary by 42%. By contrast, difference between the highest and lowest percentages of agreement with this statement in Canada was only 6%, from 21% in Alberta and Manitoba/Saskatchewan to 15% in Quebec. (Adams 86-87)<sup>2</sup> Though they are difficult to define, regions do exist in most of our minds, and their implications for our culture as a whole make them worth of further exploration.

Adams's research begins with assuming a regional map, and then focusing on questions which can contribute to an understanding of what people in those regions are like. Most of the books and articles I have located in my research have taken this approach. Any analysis of what regions are like must start with some understanding of where the regions are. Authors of most books with a social science bend tend to synthesize a broad range of historical, economic, cultural, and geophysical information in creating their regional boundaries. Examples of this methodology are discussed in the Introduction to Raymond Gastil's *Cultural Regions of the United States* and in Chapter 5 of Tom McKnight's *Regional Geography of Anglo-America*<sup>3</sup>. In *The Nine Nations of North America*, Joel Garreau takes a completely different approach, and describes nine regions based on a more intuitive understanding based on a career in journalism and trying to understand what is was like out there in North America (Garreau ix). This does seem a very good way to get at the idea of vernacular regions, as they exist out there in the minds of the masses. I think it is possible, however to walk a line somewhere in-between these two camps – to collect cognitive maps based on the perceptions of ordinary people, while still collecting them in such a format so as to make them comparable to each other, and to make aggregation of such maps possible.

Rather than try to say very much about what these regions are like, which is the primary concern of Gastil, McKnight, Garreau, and others, I plan to address the more basic question of where the regions are. As a vernacular region is something which exists, to one degree or another, in the backs of all of our minds, it seems that the most logical way to map them was to simply ask a lot of people “What regions are there in the United States?”, but I have found very few articles dealing with this subject directly.

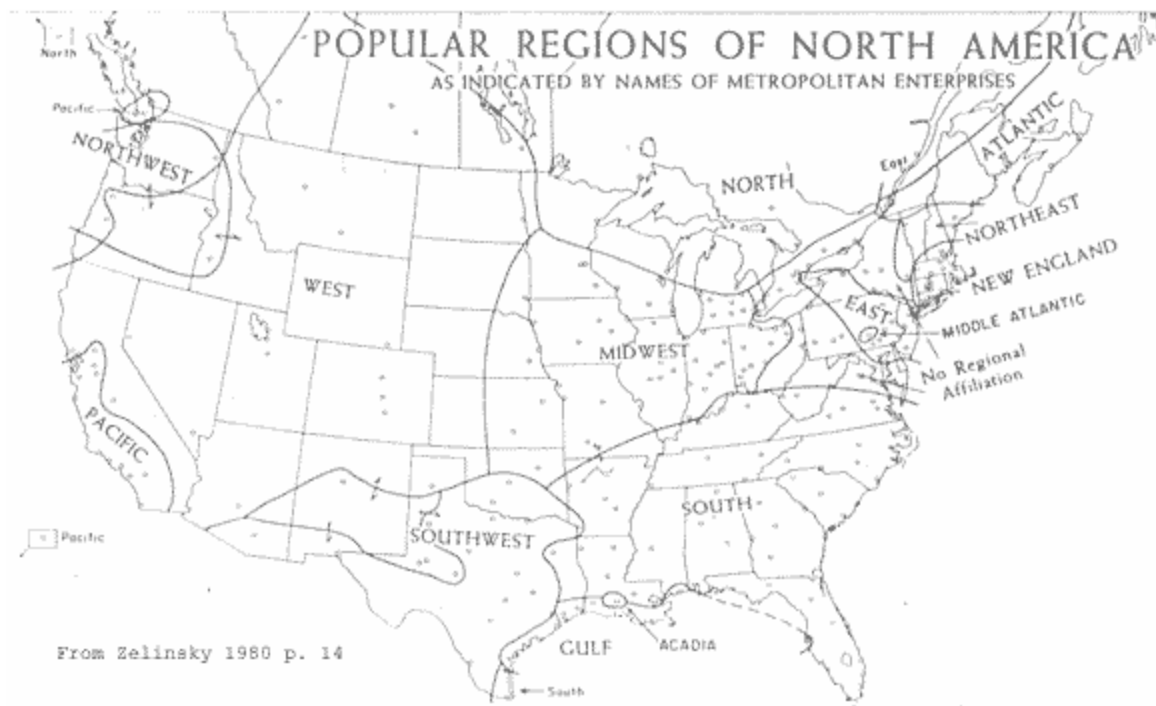
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<sup>2</sup>A shortened version of Harris's survey, including the 'father as head-of-household' question, is available online at <http://fireandice.environics.net>.

<sup>3</sup>McKnight's book was re-printed in 1992 as *Regional Geography of the United States and Canada*.

Before detailing my own approach to mapping vernacular regions, it is worth reviewing some earlier attempts to locate and understand them.

In “*North America's Vernacular Regions*”, Wilbur Zelinsky set out to draw a regional map of the US and Canada by reviewing an unusual source of primary data – the frequency of regional and national terms in the business listings of telephone directories. He compiled a list of regional terms, and measured how often they occurred in phone books from all over the US and Canada. “The crucial axiom upon which this inquiry rests is that the frequency with which people attach certain names to their enterprises... is a relatively sensitive measure of group perceptions of the locus within sociocultural space. (Zelinsky 7)” He admits that there is no direct way to verify this contention, but I agree with him that it has significant intuitive appeal.<sup>4</sup> He produced a series of maps detailing various vernacular regions based on his research. An aggregate map, which synthesizes all the regional data, is shown below.



Overall, Zelinsky produced a map with intuitive descriptive appeal from a very novel source of data. I do think, and his own conclusions agree, that there are many areas where this research could be improved upon.

The methodology opens a large opportunity for the individual biases of the researcher to affect the results of the study, inasmuch as the selecting of regional or national terms depends on the intuition and 'common sense' of the researcher. Second, the study involved only Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (Zelinsky 4), areas which contain populations of greater than 50,000 people. No doubt this includes the majority of the population, but it leaves the borders of sparsely populated regions (especially in the

<sup>4</sup>It seems no coincidence that flipping to 'Rocky Mountain' in the Denver Yellow Pages turns up many more entries than in Phoenix, while the Phoenix book contains many more 'Southwest' or 'Desert' entries.

west) poorly defined. Finally, there is no way to control for important socioeconomic variables such as age or educational level. Existing research indicates that these factors can have a significant influence on regional affiliation.

“The ties between traditional Midwestern and Southern values and rural, lesser-educated, and little-traveled populations, noted previously, seem most obvious. This situation is complicated, however. Reed found that although regional identity was highest among such people, consciousness (another important component of regional affiliation) was highest among people with the opposite social characteristics. Educated, urban, well-traveled people tend to think about and in terms of regions more than others do but objectively possess few of the traditional conservative values (Shortridge 1987 329).”

James Shortridge published a paper with a goal similar to Zelinsky, using very different primary data. Instead of telephone books, Shortridge used warranty cards (11,689 of them) which were sent to Cobra Communications by purchasers of CB radios between 1979 and 1980 (Shortridge 1987 326). The cards contained one line requesting the purchaser to check one of four boxes indicating their 'region' : 'East', 'West', 'South', and 'Midwest'.



*Illustration 1 From Shortridge 1987 p.328*

The maps produced from the Cobra data have many similarities to Zelinsky's earlier work, but because they include demographic data in addition to the question of regional affiliation, additional insights are possible.

Most interesting are the varying regional affiliations between people of different ages in the same location. More specifically, it may not be a variation based on age *per se*, but rather one among people varying in “education, travel experience outside the region, and urban residence (Shortridge 1987 328).” As different age groups tend to

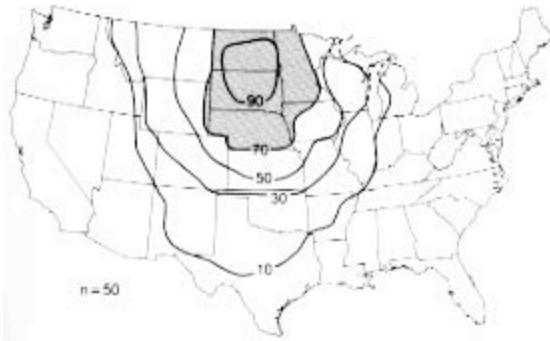
vary widely in these areas, regional definitions may indeed change as the population grows older, and these changes may be connected to changes in the nation as a whole which tend toward greater mobility and concentration of population in urban centers.

In the transition zone between the 'East' and 'Midwest', in the general area of Michigan and Ohio, “people under 35 labeled themselves Easterners at higher than predicted rates, whereas those over 50 tended to use the Midwest label (Shortridge 1987 329).” The Dallas – Ft. Worth area of Texas “seems to be in the process of simplifying its complex regional affiliation. Midwest allegiance there, currently intermediate between Western and Southern feelings, is concentrated among the elderly and thus probably is waning (Shortridge 1987 334).” While it may seem clear from this data that, with the passage of time, these two transition zones will both move away from 'Midwest' affiliation (as those attached to the 'Midwest' die and are replaced by people seeing themselves as part of a different region), the question is complicated by one important factor. The data is unable to resolve whether “the differences observed were products of fundamental distinctions between the formative experiences of the older and younger respondents... [or] if the differences were a product of the aging process alone (Shortridge 1987 328).” In the former case, one would expect regional labels to indeed shift over time, while in the latter case one would expect these boundaries to be basically stable.

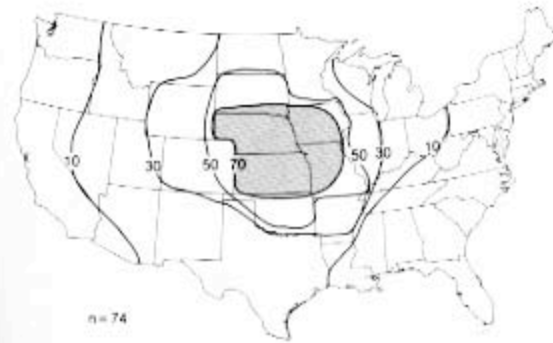
Both of the studies reviewed above address the question “How do we<sup>5</sup> see ourselves”, and are unable to address the question “How do we see other regions, or the country as a whole?”. To elaborate on why that distinction may be problematic, consider that at least one region, the 'Midwest' or 'Middle-West', has greatly differing boundaries when drawn by people from different areas. In *The Middle West : Its Meaning in American Culture*, Shortridge describes maps of 'the Middle West' he constructed based on surveys of college students in the 1980s. The students were presented with a map of the United States, and simply asked to draw the boundaries of 'the Middle West' on the map (Shortridge 1989 84). He discovered that people from different parts of the country placed 'the Middle West' in very different places.

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<sup>5</sup>Residents of any given vernacular region.



Map 5.5. The Middle West as Seen from North Dakota



Map 5.8. The Middle West as Seen from California



Map 5.10. The Middle West as Seen from Ohio

In each of these illustrations, the isolines indicate the percentage of students' maps which include the area in 'the Middle West', with shading enclosing the 70% isoline. These variations show the benefits in studying not only how people view the boundaries of their own region, but how they see the boundaries of other regions as well. Are other regions, such as 'New England' or 'the Southwest' similar to the 'Middle West' as mapped by Shortridge? Do their boundaries vary depending on who draws them, or is this a phenomena unique to 'the Middle West'?

Shortridge ends his 1987 paper with two principal conclusions. First, that “[r]egional labels are dynamic, not static, entities (Shortridge 1987 335).” Second, that the “dynamics of the four labels studied here, as well as others, deserve regular monitoring (Shortridge 1987 335).” He also comments, as did Zelinsky, on the difficulty of locating sources of primary data which can be used in these investigations. “An ideal data set for vernacular regionalization, with careful controls for socioeconomic and other variables, probably never can be achieved short of inserting a new question on federal census forms (Shortridge 1987 326).”

It seems quite logical that it is difficult to study a topic with little primary data, where the data is likely to change (and thus become outdated) over time. It is here that I think a web-based attempt to collect vernacular region mapping data can make an important contribution. A web-based mapping website can be immediately available to the Internet-connected segment of society.<sup>6</sup> It can exist in an ongoing manner, being open and available to collect new map submissions with little direct intervention from the

<sup>6</sup>It is important to note here that a large segment of society does not have regular Internet access.

site's maintainers. The data collected will already be coded and available for easy distribution to anyone who may have an interest in the subject. I do not claim to be anything more than an amateur geographer, but I have skills in web development. I think these can be very effectively utilized to collect some important geographical data, and to share that information with the geography community as a whole.

In thinking about the design of the mapping program I will create, I have been greatly influenced by both the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches taken by Zelinsky and Shortridge.

First, I am aware that a well-designed questionnaire will be absolutely critical in accurately assessing what kind of person is completing each map. The survey will need to collect information about age, geographic location, educational level, sex, and a number of other factors which may influence perceptions of regions in the US. Importantly, though, it will not be necessary to uniquely identify any person with such information as first and last name, or email address. Submitting this information can remain completely optional, which (I hope) will increase both the number and quality of the responses I receive.

Second, the national maps drawn by Zelinsky and Shortridge (1987) look only at how residents of a region see their own region. The web-based approach will be able to ask people not only about the shape of their own region, but also about others in the country. In this way, it will be able to do for the entire country what Shortridge's 1989 maps did for 'the Middle West'.

### **Project Goals :**

1. Collect responses from all parts of the country, hopefully mirroring the population distribution of the country as a whole.
2. Collect responses from all ranges of the demographic categories defined in the questionnaire.
3. Focus on transition zones in Ohio, Virginia, and Texas. Also focus on the less-populated areas of the interior west, since other data sets contain relatively few responses from this area.
4. Compare data to Zelinsky's and Shortridge's maps, especially to see if the transition zones have shifted over the past 15-25 years.

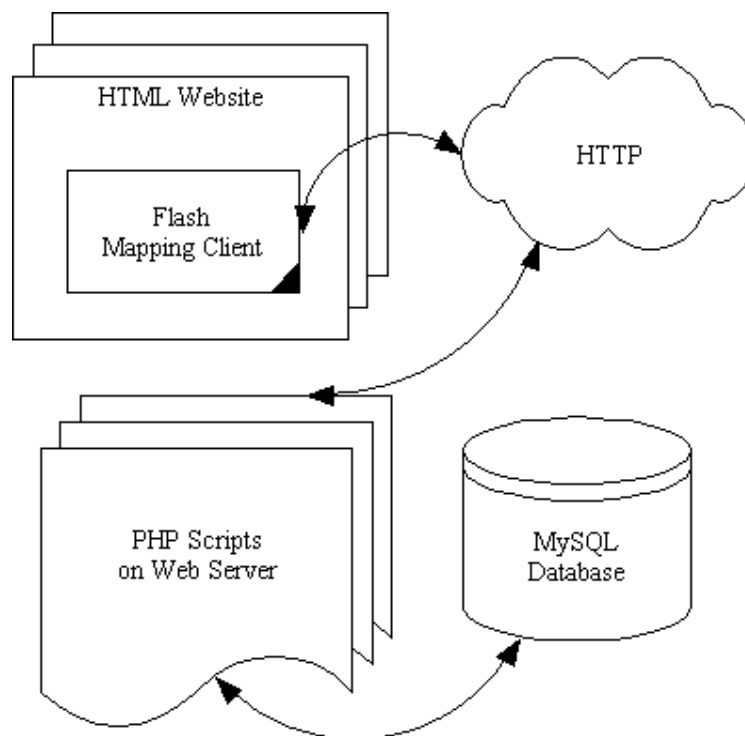
### **Technical Description :**

The client program used to collect maps from respondents will be created with Flash. The program's multimedia capabilities, good data compression, ability to interface with server-side scripts and databases, and the penetration of its player software into a large percentage of web browsers make it ideal for the purpose.

The client will be a map of the United States, overlaid with small boxes contained in movie clips which respond to a user's mouse clicks. All boxes will be transparent in the beginning, indicating that they are not assigned to any region. After a user creates a region (by choosing a name and a color for the region in a sidebar menu), s/he will be able to indicate where that region lies on the main map by clicking on all

boxes which s/he wants to include in that region. When a box is clicked on, it will assume the color of the selected region. The program will keep an ongoing tally of which boxes have been assigned to which regions, as well as the general information on what the regions have been named and what colors have been selected to represent them.

When the user has completed their map and clicked the 'Submit' button, all information on the current state of their map will be sent to a server-side PHP script via an HTTP POST. The PHP script will submit all this information to a MySQL database, and return a 'success' or 'failure' message to the Flash client when finished. If the client receives a 'success' message, it will redirect the user to a 'thank you for your submission' page, and offer links to other sections of the web site. If the client receives a 'failure' message, the user will be asked to re-submit their map to the server. On failure, the server will also dispatch an email message to a system administrator describing the failure.



### **Possible Analysis of Collected Data :**

One of the main analytical tasks of the project will be to produce some set of maps which aggregate all submitted maps. The task will be complicated by the fact that respondents will be allowed a high degree of personalization in creating their maps. They will not be offered any pre-defined set of regional terms, or colors to represent those terms. Imposing these standards from the beginning would make analysis easier, but would also unnecessarily bias the respondents by forcing them to use the pre-defined labels instead of creating their own.

The first type of aggregate map will be one similar to the 'Middle West' isoline maps created by Shortridge. After selecting a single point from the data set, it will be possible to create a map by coloring all other points to indicate how often each other

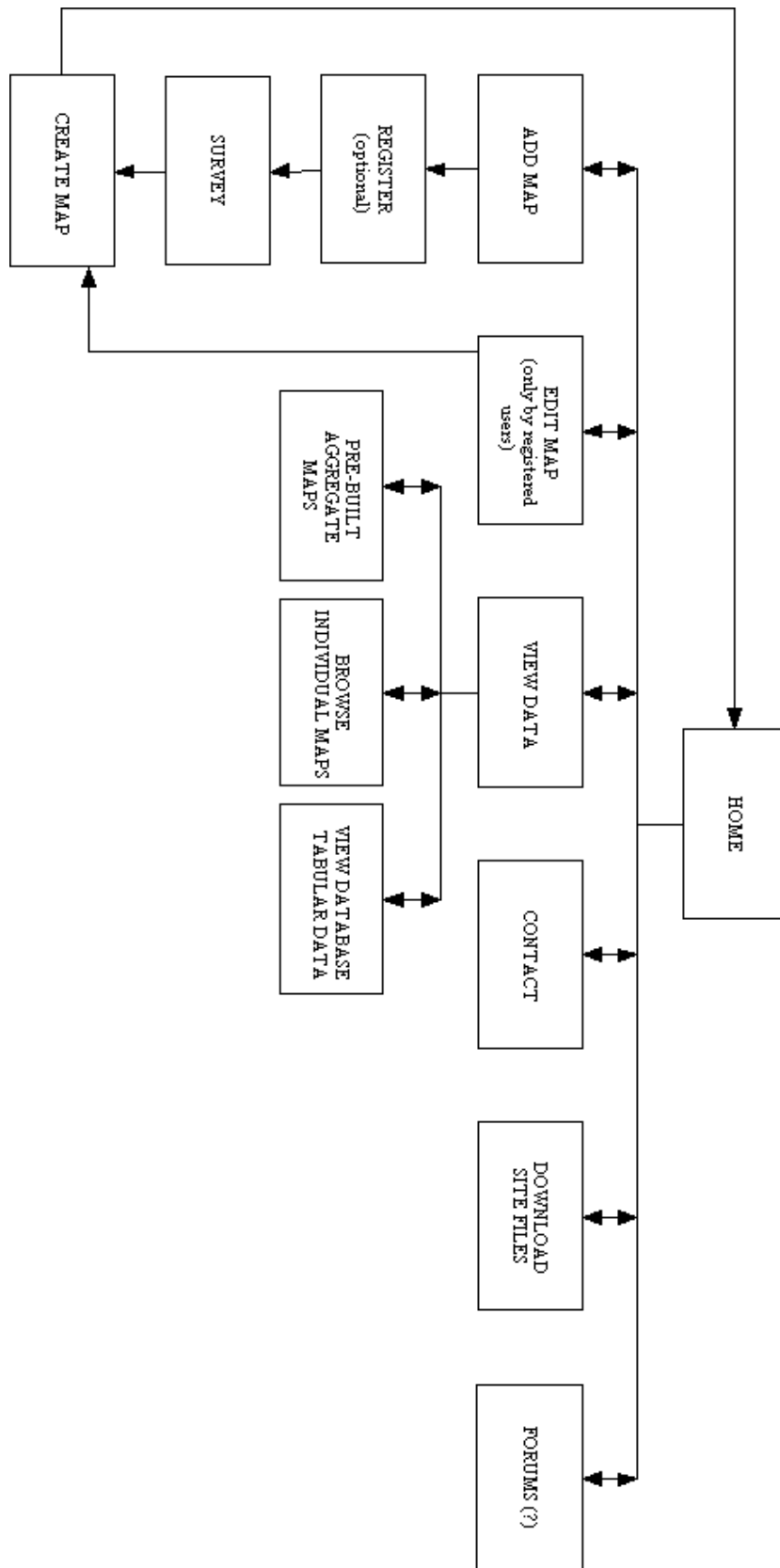
box on the map was assigned to the same region as the selected initial point. For example, selecting the point which represents Denver will likely show over 90% of respondents placed Colorado Springs in the same region. The map will be more interesting when observing locations closer to the 'West' / 'Middle West' border identified by Shortridge and Zelinsky in their respective articles. Maps of this kind will be able to be drawn while controlling for any of the collected demographic data – by limiting the data set for the map, for example, to only those under 20, or from those living in Denver (how we see our own region), or from those living outside Denver (how others see our region).

This first kind of map is intended only to show the extent of one region at a time. A comprehensive map, showing an aggregation of all regions at once, is more complex. Because there is no single beginning point (and region) to compare each subsequent point to, the algorithm listed above is not possible. It is possible, however, to compare each point on the map to its neighbors, those immediately before and after it on both the x and y axes. The focus thus becomes not the square area of each box, but rather the line separating each box from the adjacent boxes. By coloring boxes to represent how often they fall into the same regional grouping as their neighbors, borders (where adjacent boxes are in the same region infrequently) emerge. The results is another isoline map, but this time the areas of difference, instead of commonality as in the first type of map, are most interesting. These are the boundaries between regions. Where regions are well-defined and have a large consensus on their boundaries, these lines should be fairly sharp. Along regional borders which are poorly defined (in the collected data and thus perhaps in peoples' minds) the border area will be much larger. Filtering the data set to control for age, or education level, or any other demographic data, may reveal how various groups differ or agree on the location and extent of vernacular regions.

This aggregate map, because it requires four comparisons (up, down, left, and right) for each box, will require a large amount of processing time to complete. As such, it should probably only be compiled once daily, and not simply 'on demand', to save load on the web server.

Both of these approaches focus on the the collected locational data demographic data. There are two more kinds of data which may be worth examining. First are the names respondents assign to their regions. Second are the colors respondents assign to their regions. I am less sure how to analyze or synthesize this kind of data, but it will be made available for anyone who may be interested to try. My assumption is that the color selections will be more or less random, suiting whatever whims strike the respondent when the complete the maps. But, if commonalities in color selection emerge for certain regions, that may indicate important connections between the color and the region. What this may or may not mean would be open to interpretation. For the names selected, I am curious if 'Middle West' or 'Midwest' will be more common, and how the preference for one or the other may be affected by age, or geographic location. No doubt other comparisons between competing regional labels will be possible, and Zelinsky's list of identified regional terms (Zelinsky 5) would be worth comparing to the collected data.

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