

THE HOSPITABLE SOUTH:
RELIGION, POLITICS, AND BELONGING IN A SOUTHERN COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACTTHE HOSPITABLE SOUTH:
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This dissertation interrogates the so-called myth of Southern hospitality. I review the historical origins of hospitality on antebellum plantations and engage with theoretical distinctions that have been made between hospitality as discourse and hospitality as practice. Given decades of social and political change in the region, I ask, how is Southern hospitality practiced today, and what are the consequences?

I draw on ethnographic and interview data from a community study in Rockdale County, Georgia to explore how the culture of Southern hospitality became manifested as a set of religious practices through which residents determined who did and did not belong in their local community. Originally a mostly-white farming community, Rockdale had witnessed decades of dramatic population growth and diversification during Metro Atlanta's rapid expansion. I explain how changes like the arrival of immigrants and growth of non-white populations made the community a fitting place for observing how Southern hospitality, with its ethos of gracious hosts and warm welcomes, was actually put into practice.

My findings reveal that for Rockdale's non-Hispanic black and white Christians, the majority group who occupied countless positions of power and influence, hospitality was understood as a prominent feature of Southern history and culture as well as a central tenet of Christian belief and practice. Through joint worship services, fellowship activities, evangelic efforts, and service projects, black and white Christians constructed reciprocal patterns of hospitality aimed at achieving racial reconciliation, and in doing so they sought to improve upon the South's shameful reputation for race-based discrimination. At the same time however, this group also came under scrutiny for their decidedly inhospitable or even hostile treatment of others, including sexual, racial-ethnic, and religious minorities.

I conclude that Southern hospitality was manifested as lived religion through practices which ultimately (re)produced social inequality in the community. By illustrating the rituals through which various types of people were either welcomed or neglected, brought into the fold or turned away, I argue that Southern hospitality may indeed take on mythic proportions but nonetheless continues to be practiced in meaningful, consequential ways.

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INTRODUCTION

In the widely-acclaimed *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, Joe Taylor argues that “hospitality is an intensely *real* aspect of southern culture,” his choice of words disputing the notion that Southern hospitality may be little more than a myth.¹ The origins of Southern hospitality can be found among the now-antiquated social practices of the antebellum planter class, and given subsequent periods which dramatically transformed Southern society—from the Civil War and Reconstruction to Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement—many would say that contemporary Southerners have simply inherited a high regard for *the idea* of Southern hospitality. From this point of view, Southern hospitality today is not so much a practice as a discourse, one which effectively celebrates Southern regional identity in large part because its idealized image of the past omits several unsavory features of the historical record, particularly the slave labor which made genteel hospitality possible. Others would like to believe as Taylor did, that even “if the circumstances of southern hospitality have changed, the spirit remains the same,” and popularly echo his insistence that “the southerner is indeed hospitable to this day, loving nothing more than to entertain family and friends with the best food and drink he can afford.”² However, with little more than colorful anecdotes and personal experiences to support such claims, a skeptical sociologist could be forgiven for wondering whether contemporary Southern hospitality is actually embodied in any unique social practice at all. Is Southern hospitality simply a historical artifact used to maintain the myth of Southern exceptionalism? Is it merely a romanticized version of past events, a fairytale Southerners tell themselves and others as they construct their regional identities?

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore Southern hospitality as a culture which continues to be made “real” through ongoing social practices in one local community. Drawing on

¹ Taylor, “Hospitality,” 1133, emphasis added.

² *Ibid.*, 1134.

two-and-a-half years of ethnographic fieldwork in Rockdale County, Georgia, I use data gathered through participant observation, formal interviews, and other qualitative research methods to illustrate the meaningful ways in which locals not only talk about Southern hospitality as a basis for imagining a distinctive Southern region but also embody Southern hospitality by performing specific rituals and customs in their own community. In order to understand how residents of Rockdale see themselves as practicing hospitality, I turn to intersections of their regional identities as Southerners and religious identities as Christians, a perspective located at the nexus of Southern hospitality and Christian hospitality. From this angle, the significance of Christian hospitality to local church culture is enmeshed with that of Southern hospitality to the region's unique identity, just as the South's legacy of genteel hospitality is linked inextricably to its popular reputation as the "Bible Belt." This approach not only highlights nuanced ways in which two hallmarks of Southern culture—hospitality and Christianity—are intimately connected in the daily lives of Rockdale's residents, but also explains how the practice of Southern hospitality has evolved such that the myth of a continuously and monolithically hospitable South can be maintained in spite of socio-political upheavals which have fundamentally altered Southern society since the antebellum period.

Rockdale is located about half an hour east of Downtown Atlanta and has experienced several decades of significant demographic and ecological change. Originally a small, rural community of predominantly white farmers and cotton mill workers, the county was integrated into the Metro Atlanta area by the installation of Interstate 20 during the 1960s and subsequently witnessed drastic population growth and suburban-style residential and commercial development. More recently, the ongoing arrival of mostly non-white newcomers from nearby Metro Atlanta communities as well as other states, regions, and countries has significantly diversified the county's growing population. My observations show that the notion of Southern hospitality, with its ethos of gracious hosts and warm welcomes, forms the backbone of the community's identity. However, given the occurrence of ostensibly unwelcome changes like the rise of a black majority, the arrival of Spanish-speaking immigrants, and the transformation of once bucolic farmland into

busy subdivisions and shopping centers, I examine how residents used the practice of hospitality to negotiate the politics of who does and does not belong in their changing community.

I found that for Rockdale's non-Hispanic black and white Christians, the majority group who occupied countless positions of power and influence, hospitality was understood as a prominent feature of Southern history and culture as well as a central tenet of Christian belief and practice. Through joint worship services, fellowship activities, evangelic efforts, and service projects, black and white Christians constructed reciprocal patterns of hospitality aimed at achieving racial reconciliation, and in doing so they sought to improve upon the South's shameful reputation for race-based discrimination, or as it is commonly called, "America's original sin."³ At the same time however, this group also came under scrutiny for their decidedly inhospitable or even hostile treatment of others, including sexual, racial-ethnic, and religious minorities. Thus, I argue that Southern hospitality became manifested as lived religion through practices which ultimately (re)produced social inequality in the community. By illustrating the rituals through which various types of people were either welcomed or neglected, brought into the fold or turned away, I argue that Southern hospitality may indeed take on mythic proportions but nonetheless continues to be practiced in meaningful, consequential ways.

Hospitality in the Old South

The practice of Southern hospitality served a variety of purposes for the antebellum period's white planter class, including the maintenance of relationships with extended kin who customarily made regular visits to the homes of their aunts, uncles, and cousins. As historian Joan Cashin explains,⁴ ceremonial and ritual events like weddings, funerals, and graduations often involved the extended stay of many relatives at a time, and children who fell ill were often sent to convalesce at a relative's home in order to take advantage of a better climate or to

³ See, for example, Jim Wallis's *America's Original Sin*.

⁴ Cashin, "The Structure of Antebellum Planter Families."

prevent contagious disease from spreading to vulnerable siblings. Other times, the only excuse for a visit was to encourage the development of strong emotional bonds among cousins, and children often stayed in the home of an aunt and uncle for a few weeks or even months at a time for this sole purpose. As a result, many young adults regarded their favorite same-sex cousins as more like siblings or best friends, and young men who started new business ventures often did so in partnership with their dearest cousins. The custom similarly resulted in many marriages between cousins who had previously developed friendships over the course of long visits in each other's homes. Given the potential to secure a future business partner or spouse, some families were understandably interested in making strategic use of hospitality to "surveil" or keep tabs on their extended kin by regularly hosting them for large family meals.⁵

Many of these lengthy visits would have required at least some advance planning due to the great distances people often travelled from their own homes to those of their extended relatives, but it was also common for people to drop in on their local kin with little or no warning at all. According to Cashin, Southern elites felt particularly entitled to impose on their relatives who lived nearby:

Kin visited for several hours or an entire day, appearing unannounced or sending messages by a neighbor, relative, or slave communicating their intentions to call ... One woman recalled that this pattern of hospitality was a virtual "law" in the family; kinfolk considered it a privilege to be exercised by anyone with the "same blood in their veins."⁶

This special privilege was reflected in plantation families' complex kinship networks, as the regularity with which extended relatives stayed for long visits meant that "household membership fluctuated from one month to the next and expanded and contracted over the years."⁷ In effect, "the planter family had a nuclear core of parents and children, but ... its borders were permeable

⁵ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 333.

⁶ Cashin, "The Structure of Antebellum Planter Families," 58-59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

and its structure was elastic, including many other relatives—aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins—who were intimate members of the family.”⁸

The practice of Southern hospitality was not limited to these extended kin networks however. Planter families regularly hosted relatives as well as neighbors and friends for dinner parties, dances, picnics, barbecues, and holiday celebrations, and they also provided accommodation to equally high-class strangers, including wealthy travelers who made their way across the Southern frontier. Compared to the North’s urbanized cities and developed towns, the South remained principally rural, sparsely populated, and in some areas, virtually unexplored. “Partaking of this primitive milieu,” explains historian William Hair, “were the spartan facilities for public transportation, food, and lodging.”⁹ Whereas a traveler through a Northern city could have dependably found decent service at a public house, those journeying through the South might have expected never to encounter a single inn or tavern depending on their route. Even in fledgling Southern cities which did sometimes feature small hotels, available facilities were widely-regarded as wholly unpleasant. Travelers through antebellum Georgia for instance described the food and lodging provided by various inns as “offensive,” “vile,” “abominable,” “wretched,” “dirty,” “horrible,” “filthy,” “miserable,” “disgusting,” and “revolting.”¹⁰ Wealthy and fashionable planter families, on the other hand, were known to frequently take in guests, including those who arrived with letters of introduction from mutual acquaintances and others who had no prior connection at all.

Due to the constant rotation of both invited guests and unexpected visitors, planter families made it a point to be prepared for company at any time, and women in particular often oversaw the provision of meals and entertainment in genteel homes. One such plantation mistress was Laura Wirt Randall, who settled on the Florida frontier with her new husband and discussed the practice of hospitality in numerous letters to family and friends between the years

⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁹ Hair, “Stagecoaches and Public Accommodations in Antebellum Georgia,” 323.

¹⁰ Ibid., 331.

1827 and 1833.¹¹ Laura described planning ahead for intimate dinner parties with neighboring families but also emphasized how important it was to be ready for unfamiliar travelers who could show up unannounced at any time. In one account for example, Laura described three gentlemen who visited the area to consider buying land and subsequently “took that opportunity to pay their respects here & at the same time ensure a good supper, lodging, & breakfast the next morning”—such men, she wrote, were “constantly pouring over the country & quartering themselves on private houses.”¹² The duties and obligations surrounding antebellum hospitality required Laura to welcome guests into her home regardless of whether they were invited or unexpected, acquainted or unknown. “They will come,” she remarked, “without waiting for an invitation.”¹³

The routine practice of antebellum hospitality meant that plantation homes were not simply family residences but crucial spaces for mixing and mingling, for participating in genteel society. Indeed, many planter families frowned upon long periods of solitude in their grand houses and looked forward to entertaining guests with great anticipation.¹⁴ For example, historian Rhys Isaac describes how elite Virginia families during the mid-eighteenth century preferred for their homes to bustle with visitors:

The ideal of the home as a center of private domesticity was not familiar ... they lived or aspired to live in the constant presence of servants and guests. Their houses were the sacrosanct settings for hospitality and for the open celebration of the major events of life and death ... Indeed, most of the dominant values of the culture were fused together in the display of hospitality, which was one of the supreme obligations that society laid upon heads of households ... the extending of hospitality was not only an obligation but also a source of intense gratification—almost an inner compulsion.¹⁵

¹¹ Jabour, “The Privations & Hardships of a New Country.”

¹² *Ibid.*, 266.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 272.

¹⁴ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 327-361; Jabour, “The Privations & Hardships of a New Country,” 273-274.

¹⁵ Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, 70-71.

The practice of hospitality therefore constituted a lexicon through which planter families communicated their honor and status with symbolic gestures of generosity and congeniality toward other members of high society. As Isaac explains, “the social standing of the head of the household was demonstrated in various rituals of hospitality.”¹⁶ The fundamental importance of hospitality rituals in maintaining the antebellum South’s social structure is perhaps best illustrated by the expansion of Southern culture into new locales. According to historian Anya Jabour for example, migrant families like Laura Wirt Randall’s who settled Florida’s plantation belt “used hospitality to mark the Florida frontier as an extension of the Old South and to claim their place among the emerging planter elite.”¹⁷ Entertaining guests provided newcomers like the Randalls with the important opportunity to show off their wealth and assert their relative status in the emerging community, and at the same time, establishing hospitality as the new community’s norm “helped to transform the ‘new country’ of the Florida frontier into the plantation society of the Old South.”¹⁸

To be sure, the practice of antebellum hospitality functioned primarily to maintain the elite status of the white planter class, and hospitality rituals effectively distinguished genteel families both from black slaves and white yeomen farmers. As Jabour explains,

Hospitality was an indicator of class status; only lavish entertaining and an open-door policy could set the Randalls and their elite neighbors apart from the slaves that they called “the sable tribe” and the yeoman farmers that they dismissed as “the poor whites by whom most of this part of the Country is settled.”¹⁹

To entertain neighbors with food and drink, to host visiting friends and relatives for days or weeks at a time, and to accommodate unexpected guests—both familiar and strange—was to belong to high society. Hospitality rituals themselves can be understood as performances, the success of which depended not only on how well each actor played his or her part but also on the credibility

¹⁶ Ibid., 301.

¹⁷ Jabour, “The Privations & Hardships of a New Country,” 265.

¹⁸ Ibid., 260.

¹⁹ Ibid., 274.

of the set design and props—i.e. the grandeur and sophistication of the plantation home along with its many luxury accoutrements.²⁰ The Randalls for example dazzled guests with the finest china, crystal, and furniture all sourced from Washington, D.C. and Baltimore by Laura’s mother, though Laura described using a different set of more “common-looking” dishes when she and her husband dined alone.²¹ In other words, the family used practical housewares during private meals, but relied on the impracticality of high-end place-settings to stage convincing displays of good taste and elite status for their guests.²²

But classy décor was only part of the act, and the exclusivity of the planter class was achieved at the particular expense of plantation slaves whose labor made hospitality rituals possible. It was after all slaves who actually produced the elaborate meals consumed by wealthy, white planters, just as it was slaves who cleaned the houses, cared for the horses, minded the children, tended the fires, and waited on the guests. Plantation mistresses might have become anxious from planning special events or tired from long hours of socializing, but they saved themselves from the real drudgery involved in the practice of hospitality by exploiting their slaves. As Southern literature scholar Anthony Szczesiul explains:

In the social practices of antebellum southern hospitality, the slave was perpetually present and perpetually unacknowledged and excluded, both relied on for service and reviled for supposed racial inferiority. This racism cannot be separated from the antebellum social practices of southern hospitality; indeed, it was the labor of the slave that provided the master the leisure to be so hospitable.²³

Working primarily as managers, women like Laura Randall merely planned menus, selected décor, and then ordered their slaves to complete various household tasks. In fact, Laura admitted that she knew very little about cooking,²⁴ which implied her dependence on the expertise

²⁰ See Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* for more on the use of dramaturgical analogies in conceptualizing routine social interaction.

²¹ Jabour, “The Privations & Hardships of a New Country,” 267, 270.

²² See Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* for an analysis of high-class conspicuous consumption as status-seeking rather than utilitarian or rational behavior.

²³ Szczesiul, *The Southern Hospitality Myth*, 10.

²⁴ Jabour, “The Privations & Hardships of a New Country,” 267.

of slave cooks, but nonetheless discussed the practice of hospitality in terms of her own inconveniences and contributions. As was common among plantation mistresses in the South,²⁵ Laura disregarded the efforts of her slaves and credited herself with providing elegant and delicious meals to visiting house guests.

Even though some Northerners might have been inclined to criticize the exploitation of slave labor, many who travelled through the South were charmed by the hospitality they received and praised the impressive skill of slave cooks just as well as the warm affability of planter families. Take John Tidball from Ohio, for example, a U.S. Army officer stationed in Augusta, Georgia in 1849 who “was intelligent and perceptive enough to realize that slavery was not a happy institution ... [and] ...viewed slavery and Southerners with the discriminating eye of a Northerner.”²⁶ In spite of this, John used great detail to recount in his personal memoirs the delight with which he first encountered the Southern hospitality of an Augusta planter family.

After going for a horseback ride and getting caught in a rainstorm, John sought shelter under a plantation’s farmyard building and soon saw the master of the house approaching to invite him indoors. John wrote that once inside, the master directed his slaves “with as much fussiness as a grandmother at the birth of her first grandchild,” ordering one to care for John’s horse and several others to help him change into a dry suit procured from the master’s own closet.²⁷ Even though the borrowed clothes were ill-fitting, John observed that “none remarked upon the ludicrous figure which I cut, all being evidently more intent upon hospitality than unfavorable criticism.”²⁸ Soon after, the planter set about providing his guest with refreshments. He called on a slave to fetch some ice and then concocted a fresh mint julep John remembered as truly extraordinary:

Poets have sung of the nectar of the gods ... but here was a reality that would have made old Juno himself smack his lips with delight. It was no ordinary public café

²⁵ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*.

²⁶ Tidball, “A Northern Soldier Samples Southern Hospitality at an ‘Up Country’ Plantation,” 95, 105.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

mixture of several kinds of liquors ... This was a well proportioned compound of a good deal of ice, a little water, some sugar, and a great deal of good old Conochocheague whiskey, with delicate sprigs of mint set in it as though sprouting up from the interior of the glass.²⁹

Dinner consisted of roasted duck, cold ham, rice with gravy, cornbread, and for dessert, bonnyclabor with brown sugar and sweet cream. "Ye shades of Lucullus!" John wrote, "Bow your heads low in honor of the Dinah of the Georgia planter's kitchen."³⁰ Utterly impressed with what he described as "the most open-hearted hospitality," John looked past his own criticisms of the South in general and slavery in particular by concluding that "the very atmosphere of a plantation was hospitality to the stranger."³¹

Antebellum hospitality rituals ultimately functioned as mechanisms of inequality by creating and recreating the Old South's most fundamental points of distinction between black and white, rich and poor, slave and free. In extending warm welcomes to their friends, family, neighbors, and equally high-status strangers, elite Southern families created what Jabour describes as "reciprocal patterns of hospitality [which] bound together the great planters."³² Moreover, Southern hospitality's dependence on the exploitation of slave labor contributed to the exclusivity of the planter class by maintaining two important social boundaries—that between black slaves and white masters, and that between wealthy planters and poor yeomen farmers.³³ The service that masters demanded of their household cooks and waiters during hospitality rituals symbolized the larger power imbalance between Southern whites, who were free, and Southern blacks, who were enslaved, and at the same time, the exploitation of slave labor also symbolized the great chasm separating elite whites who could afford to own slaves from poor whites who scraped by as yeomen farmers. Together then, the practice of hospitality in the Old South

²⁹ Ibid., 99.

³⁰ Ibid., 101.

³¹ Ibid., 102, 97-98.

³² Jabour, "The Privations & Hardships of a New Country," 273.

³³ See Lamont and Molnár's "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences" for a review of the literature on symbolic and social boundaries.

secured the high social standing of genteel families by subjugating the slave population to subservient roles on plantations while also relegating the yeomen farmer population to the status of “poor white trash.”

Hospitality in the New South and Beyond

The South’s antebellum plantation society was irreparably altered by the Civil War and Reconstruction, and subsequent socio-political upheavals like the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights Movement continued to transform the structure of social life in the South. Of course race and class continue to operate as durable systems of inequality, but the demise of the South’s plantation economy coupled with the abolition of slavery spelled the end of antebellum hospitality rituals common to the Old South. It goes without saying that Southern elites no longer provide for guests by ordering their slaves to bake hams and turn down bedsheets, and the eventual urbanization of the Southern region gave rise to an abundance of commercial outlets providing travelers with basic amenities like food and lodging. Today’s tourists to the South have no need to approach the home of an anonymous stranger when they can stay at a Holiday Inn hotel and enjoy a complimentary buffet breakfast instead.

Despite these changes, images of the hospitable South persist in the public imagination, and the region continues to be renowned for its supposedly gracious hosts and warm welcomes. Accordingly, many scholars have chosen to focus on various mythic dimensions of contemporary Southern hospitality by considering how idealized images of the past are used to construct regional identities in the present. Szczesiul’s approach for example makes an analytical distinction between the antebellum *practice* of Southern hospitality and the present-day *discourse* of Southern hospitality. In explaining how the South’s reputation for hospitality has been maintained in spite of the decline of antebellum customs, Szczesiul argues that “a long view of southern hospitality shows that in the give and take between speech acts and social rituals ...

language can eventually trump practice.”³⁴ In other words, even though the practices common to antebellum planters became obsolete, the discourse of Southern hospitality took on a life of its own and ultimately came to be the primary performance through which the culture of Southern hospitality is reconstructed over time:

Perhaps “southern hospitality” initially came into being as a reflection of actual social practices associated with the antebellum planter classes, but over its long history of iterations the phrase became unmoored and increasingly removed from these restricted antebellum origins—so much so that the utterance of “southern hospitality” is like a performative speech act: it is the *expression* of “southern hospitality” that *creates* southern hospitality.³⁵

This discourse serves as a “gesture to the past” or a collective memory through which Southerners as well as non-Southerners continue to portray the region as having a unique heritage and culture distinct from the rest of the country.³⁶ It is by verbally referencing the idea of hospitality for example that a contemporary Southerner might articulate his or her regional identity and pride. What Szczesiul draws our particular attention to however is the degree to which this discourse effectively celebrates Southern hospitality by turning a blind eye to the exploitative circumstances under which it was originally practiced:

Since the Civil War and through segregation, the discourse of southern hospitality has largely been used to connect the postbellum South with the antebellum South in a way that reveres the patriarchal power structure and aristocratic sensibilities of the Old South, while forgetting that the historical origins of southern hospitality (its founding events) lie in an economy of slave labor. Indeed, the legendary hospitality of antebellum planters—the “origins” of the myth—was only possible through slaves, whose labors provided their masters both the wealth and the leisure to entertain their guests so freely. Since the Civil War, Americans have largely chosen to forget this basic historical fact.³⁷

³⁴ Szczesiul, “Re-Mapping Southern Hospitality,” 130.

³⁵ Szczesiul, *The Southern Hospitality Myth*, 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

In discounting those aspects of antebellum hospitality which are considered immoral or even depraved by today's standards, the contemporary discourse of Southern hospitality is used not only to render Southern culture as a meaningful category but also to idealize the South's past as dignified and charming as opposed to violent and racist.

One enlightening application of discursive approaches like Szczesiul's has been the study of the South's evolving hospitality industry—after all, promoting tourism in various Southern locales necessarily involves the careful use of particular discursive strategies, many of which employ Southern hospitality as “a free-floating nostalgic image, an effective commercial concept, and a consumer commodity.”³⁸ Public policy expert Harvey Newman's work for example addresses the relationship between romanticized notions of Southern hospitality in Georgia and the concerted effort to grow Atlanta's hospitality industry, especially its market for hosting conventions in the city's downtown district.³⁹ Throughout the 20th century, Atlanta's business and political leaders worked to attract conventions by advertising “its transportation connections, its growing importance as a regional commercial center, and its warm southern hospitality.”⁴⁰ At the same time however, public discourse on racialized urban violence meant that city leaders had to navigate contradicting images of the South in order to successfully attract visitors. During desegregation for instance, Atlanta avoided the same high levels of violence witnessed in other Southern cities and promoted itself—dubiously—as “The City Too Busy to Hate.” Not long thereafter, skeptics pointed to unprecedented rates of white flight from the city to the suburbs and dubbed Atlanta “The City Too Busy *Moving* to Hate.”⁴¹

Atlanta-based Delta Air Lines similarly exploited the myth of Southern hospitality to claim its own corner of the region's expanding tourism market. Whereas their competitor Pan Am's marketing strategy relied on images of cultural sophistication and cosmopolitanism, Delta

³⁸ Ibid., 7-8.

³⁹ Newman, *Southern Hospitality*.

⁴⁰ Newman, “Hospitality and Violence,” 545.

⁴¹ See Kruse's *White Flight* for more on the relationship between Atlanta's white flight and the political ideology of modern conservatism.

appealed to its customers with promises of genuine Southern hospitality. When the company first started offering in-flight breakfast around the year 1940 for example, menu covers featured the following description, “A Cheery Breakfast/Served Aloft/Amid Real Southern Hospitality.”⁴² By the late 1950s the company had adopted the slogan “Hospitality and Service from the Heart,”⁴³ and one ad from that period claimed that “Delta brings the warmth of Southern hospitality to the skies of New York” in a promotion for new service routes connecting destinations in the North and South:

Whether you're on the world's fastest, finest airliner—a deluxe *Golden Crown* DC-7 to New Orleans—or heading for Dallas on a DC-6 Day-coach—Delta hospitality makes it the kind of flight you *want* to remember. It gives added flavor to your Plantation Breakfast ... makes your broiled-to-order Filet Mignon more tempting. It gives a glow of friendliness to each thoughtful act of your stewardess. All because Delta people *believe* in hospitality, offer it from the heart. This kind of service led two million people to fly Delta last year for a total of a *billion* passenger miles. Next time you fly North or South, you-all call Delta!⁴⁴

In marketing “Plantation Breakfasts” to “you-all”—a variation of “y’all” described as “chiefly Southern” by the experts at Merriam-Webster⁴⁵—Delta successfully commodified the idea of a distinctive South by referencing romanticized images of antebellum society, images devoid of slave labor, race-based violence, and sectional conflict.

Other scholars have similarly analyzed public-facing promotional materials to highlight the social implications of various marketing strategies in the South. Geographer Derek Alderman and historian E. Arnold Modlin for example consider *who* the South is marketed to by examining photographs of people included in tourism ads. Based on an analysis of 275 North Carolina travel brochures, they note that “it is difficult to find a brochure from the region that does not make some reference to southerners as being naturally hospitable or friendly to visitors.”⁴⁶ Yet, the

⁴² Delta Air Lines, “Delta Breakfast Menu.”

⁴³ Delta Air Lines, “Delta Brand.”

⁴⁴ Delta Air Lines, “Delta Brings the Warmth of Southern Hospitality to the Skies of New York.”

⁴⁵ Merriam-Webster, “You-all.”

⁴⁶ Alderman and Modlin, “Southern Hospitality and the Politics of African American Belonging,” 12.

researchers found that only 8.2% of the brochure photographs featuring people included African Americans, while the rest included whites almost exclusively.⁴⁷ This stands in high contrast to the fact that African Americans constitute 22% of North Carolina's population and over 12% of all tourists to the state in 2009.⁴⁸ In arguing that these patterns can be understood as part of the South's legacy of excluding blacks from hospitality rituals as well as from travel and tourism during the antebellum era, the authors suggest that "while southern hospitality has since developed into a discourse that stretches far beyond the image of the planter class ... contemporary notions of hospitality in the South continue to idealize this image of the past."⁴⁹

Likewise, tourism to historic plantations themselves represents an especially vivid example of what geographer David Butler calls the "whitewashing" of places used for "the collection of historical myths that serve to legitimate present ideologies."⁵⁰ After analyzing over 100 plantation brochures and pamphlets he concluded that "slavery was for the most part ignored or marginalized at the tourist plantations throughout the historic slave-owning South."⁵¹ He suggests that one important implication of this trend is a gradual change in the meaning of "plantation" altogether. Even though the word's origins make it nearly synonymous with slavery and indentured servitude, today it is often used to indicate little more than elegance or grandeur:

It has (d)evolved to the point where various land holdings, motels, hotels, restaurants and other sites have all borrowed the name. Indeed, one "plantation" contacted as part of this research turned out to be a children's amusement park. When asked why she had designated it a "plantation," the owner replied that it was a common name in the area and that it was one likely to attract tourists. It can thus be seen that the term "plantation" is undergoing a major revision. It is no longer a stigmatized concept automatically associated with slavery. Instead it has been bestowed on places at which to stay, eat and be entertained in a grand fashion. The term now connotes

⁴⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁰ Butler, "Whitewashing Plantations," 170.

⁵¹ Ibid., 169.

opulence because of its connection with Great Houses and the derived wealth of the original owners and their descendants, much of which is highlighted on the tours.⁵²

As Butler points out, this sanitized image of antebellum plantation life was especially popularized by the film *Gone with the Wind*, based on Atlanta native Margaret Mitchell's novel by the same name.⁵³ Historian Jennifer Dickey reminds us however that the processes through which collective memories become widely agreed upon are contentious, and Atlanta's well-known association with *Gone with the Wind* has functioned as both "a boon and a burden" for the city due to Mitchell's controversial portrayal of the South's planter class which many consider to be "whitewashed."⁵⁴ Indeed, some have used counter-discourse to critique unduly romanticized interpretations of Southern history in an attempt to thwart the selectivity with which mainstream audiences remember the antebellum period. Alice Randall's best-selling novel *The Wind Done Gone* for example tells an alternative account of Mitchell's story and features the heroine Cynara, a mulatto slave born of an illicit relationship between Scarlett's father and "Mammy."⁵⁵ Works like these call our attention to the social construction of collective memories and cultural myths by highlighting unconventional interpretations of otherwise dominant discourses.

Discursive approaches to the study of Southern hospitality are valuable because they highlight the meaning-making capacity of simple talk and link the construction of contemporary folk identities to collective memory and revisionist history. But is Southern hospitality in the New South *more* than talk? Szczesiul is careful to qualify his theoretical orientation as allowing for the practice of contemporary hospitality through means other than discourse alone. "My approach ... does not mean that I believe hospitality is non-existent in the South," he contends, "I do believe individuals—of *all* regions—are capable of hospitable thought and action."⁵⁶ Yet, he insists that contemporary Southern hospitality is first and foremost constructed through talk, that "we

⁵² Ibid., 171.

⁵³ Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*.

⁵⁴ Dickey, *A Tough Little Patch of History*, 4, 13.

⁵⁵ Randall, *The Wind Done Gone*.

⁵⁶ Szczesiul, "Re-Mapping Southern Hospitality," 139.

recognise southern hospitality not from having experienced it so much as from having heard about it over and over again in a history of repetition and citation.”⁵⁷

Studying the South’s hospitality industry is a clever way of reflecting on what the culture of Southern hospitality has evolved into today, but it doesn’t answer the question of whether Southern hospitality continues to be practiced as anything other than discourse in contemporary communities. Returning to the case of Delta Air Lines, it is worth noting that the company conveyed Southern hospitality not only through the discourse of “Plantation Breakfasts” but also with “service from the heart” provided by flight attendants who were trained to treat passengers hospitably. It was customer service after all which Delta founder C.E. Woolman regarded as the ultimate expression of the Southern hospitality ideal. “The individual people of Delta will determine whether we maintain our reputation for customer service,” he argued, “[and] every employee has the power to destroy or uphold that tradition for courtesy and real hospitality.”⁵⁸ In her landmark study of jobs which require “emotional labor,” sociologist Arlie Hochschild found that during their extensive training, Delta flight attendants were taught to sell Southern womanhood by treating airplane cabins like their own living rooms,⁵⁹ and according to geographer Drew Whitelegg, even when Delta customers behaved rudely or proved hard to please, attendants were expected “to think of passengers as visiting guests.”⁶⁰ Given these instructions, we can assume that women who trained to become Delta flight attendants were already familiar with a specific set of rituals and customs symbolizing the idea of Southern hospitality. Indeed, their ability to translate the discourse of genuine, heartfelt hospitality into particular styles of interaction with customers would have required them to recognize what it meant to *practice* Southern hospitality. “At thirty-five thousand feet,” Whitelegg asserts, “they *embodied* southern hospitality, with its stress on home, family, and womanhood.”⁶¹

⁵⁷ Ibid., 130.

⁵⁸ Delta Air Lines, “Delta Leaders.”

⁵⁹ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*.

⁶⁰ Whitelegg, “From Smiles to Miles,” 12-13.

⁶¹ Ibid., 8, emphasis added.

What we know about Delta flight attendants may only hint at the existence of observable, embodied expressions of Southern hospitality, but research in social psychology provides us with more conclusive evidence that contemporary Southerners indeed employ unique styles of social interaction reflective of a regional culture emphasizing courtesy and “good manners.” In a laboratory setting for instance, psychologist Dov Cohen and associates found that Southerners and Northerners abided by different behavioral norms and used distinct interaction rituals when faced with escalating conflict.⁶² In one experiment, the two groups responded differently to a series of persistent annoyances administered by a confederate of the research team. Northerners gradually communicated their increasing anger by giving off “small doses and signals of hostility,” but Southerners “absorbed the annoyances stoically at first, remaining polite and showing no escalation in their anger” until they finally “reacted with a delayed hostility that was more sudden and ultimately far more intense.”⁶³ In a second experiment, Southerners were less likely than Northerners to perceive anger and hostility communicated by others during objectively dangerous situations. The researchers concluded that because of Southern culture’s emphasis on politeness, “rituals for using small doses of anger, rudeness, and confrontational behavior to check another person’s actions are more part of the northern than the southern behavioral repertoire.”⁶⁴ In another series of experiments comparing the helpfulness of people in different regions of the country, psychologist Robert Levin and associates ranked the South number one in several tests of helping behavior involving anonymous pedestrians: pointing out to a stranger that s/he had accidentally dropped an ink pen, assisting a stranger with a visibly hurt leg to pick up a stack of magazines s/he had dropped, and agreeing to try to make change for a stranger’s quarter.⁶⁵

⁶² Cohen et al, “When You Call Me That, Smile!”

⁶³ Ibid., 267.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 270.

⁶⁵ Levine et al, “Helping in 36 U.S. Cities,” 76.

These literatures indicate that while the myth of Southern hospitality is perpetuated by romanticized discourses like those popularized by the South's tourism and hospitality industry, Southern culture is also manifested in observable and embodied behaviors. What remains unclear however is whether the practice of Southern hospitality simply fell by the wayside completely or instead evolved into some new set of rituals—rituals which bear little resemblance to those practiced by the antebellum planter class but nonetheless continue to symbolize the concept of a distinctive Southern region. The remaining, still-unanswered questions are those addressing the contemporary practice of Southern hospitality in local communities which bear witness to the New South's eclipsing of the Old. How do contemporary Southern families practice hospitality? What are the performances, customs, and styles of interaction through which Southerners communicate a warm welcome? How do local communities invest images of the hospitable South with meaning? What are the social consequences and implications of hospitality rituals? In what ways does the practice of Southern hospitality reinforce or diminish social inequality?

In searching for answers to these questions in Rockdale County, I've broadened my analytical view of the hospitable South to take into account another hallmark of the region's distinctive history and culture—Christianity. The South's image as a warm and friendly place is indeed rivalled by its reputation as the "Bible Belt," and scholars have noted the distinctly public character of religion in Southern politics and social life throughout the course of history. Historian Charles Reagan Wilson for example, whose career was devoted to the study of Southern culture, traces the influence of evangelical Christianity in Southern politics from the antebellum period to the present-day.⁶⁶ During the Civil War, white Southerners drew on scripture not only to construct a moral distinction between the righteous South and wicked North but also to maintain a boundary between black slaves and free whites within the South. Toward the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, religious social reformers publically enforced their

⁶⁶ Wilson, "Preachin', Prayin', and Singin' on the Public Square."

moral point of view with the rule of law by regulating Sunday conduct, including the sale of alcohol for example. Public schools during this time functioned as extensions of local church congregations with teachers and administrators carrying out the evangelical mission through classroom Bible study and organized Christian prayer. During the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other black leaders relied heavily on the public culture of evangelicalism as well as the discourse of Southern regional identity as they argued for the pre-ordained equality of all God's children, black and white. Wilson explains that across these many decades of socio-political change, the one thing that remained constant was "the long cultural hegemony of evangelical Protestants,"⁶⁷ and sociologist Shelton Reed similarly describes the South as "monolithically Protestant."⁶⁸ The region as a whole never developed a strong culture of religious pluralism, though eventual increases in migration to urban centers like Atlanta did help to cultivate religious diversity in the South's biggest cities. Still, Wilson argues that "the southern identity today resides most clearly among white conservatives and African-Americans, with religion at the core of that identity."⁶⁹

The interconnectedness of Southern hospitality rituals with the region's religious culture was evident during the antebellum period when John Tidball, the Army officer from Ohio who recorded his experience with Southern hospitality, observed that both blacks and whites in Georgia were quite religious, even pious.⁷⁰ Likewise, the Florida plantation mistress Laura Wirt Randall noted that visiting neighbors and entertaining guests was particularly common on the same day as weekly worship services at church. "It is necessary to be dressed here, *Sundays* at least, & to have your house in order, as that is a 'very chief day' ... for visiting. We have had some company, (& to dinner too) every Sunday, since we have been in our house."⁷¹ Later in

⁶⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁸ Reed, *The Enduring South*, 57.

⁶⁹ Wilson, "Preachin', Prayin', and Singin' on the Public Square," 23.

⁷⁰ Tidball, "A Northern Soldier Samples Southern Hospitality at an 'Up Country' Plantation," 101-102.

⁷¹ Jabour, "The Privations & Hardships of a New Country," 269.

1900 a man named Ernest Abbot visited the South as part of a national exploration of religious life in America and elaborated on this connection between the region's hospitality and religiosity:

... religious observances are in the South as naturally included in the hospitality of the home as anything else, so, conversely, hospitality in the South is an integral part of the church services ... they may have "hospitality committees" in the South; if they do, they count "hospitality" the genus, and "committee" the species. It is the reverse in the North, where there are committees for everything, and incidentally for welcoming strangers. Northern church hospitality is a system; Southern church hospitality is an instinct.⁷²

Other evidence suggests that hospitality rituals in the contemporary South may continue to heavily incorporate Christian religious practices as well, including for example Reed's analysis of survey data which shows that Southerners are less likely than Northerners to participate in formal leisure activities like clubs or associations and instead organize their leisure time around informal family activities at home and at church.⁷³

Evangelical media similarly indicate an intermingling of Southern hospitality with Christian hospitality. The magazine *Christianity Today* for example, founded by the well-known Southern Baptist minister Billy Graham in 1956, regularly features articles on the ethic of Biblical hospitality. In fact, submitting the search term "hospitality" to the ChristianityToday.com search engine returns a total of 472 different articles on topics as varied as how to negotiate tense family relationships at the holiday dinner table and how to respond appropriately to the international refugee crisis. One article written by missions-consultant Lisa Espineli Chinn articulates an explicit link between Southern hospitality and Christian hospitality and implies that the two are perhaps indistinguishably sacred:

God has sovereignly opened an unprecedented opportunity for the local church and campus ministries to welcome and befriend students from other nations. A small church in South Carolina had their first experience of welcoming a group of international students from 11 countries last month. The students had their first taste of *southern hospitality* that included great food, an afternoon of fishing, kayaking, and

⁷² Abbott, *Religious Life in America*, 111-112.

⁷³ Marsden et al, "American Regional Cultures and Differences in Leisure Time Activities."

visiting farms, and learning to “shag,” the official state dance. They were hosted in American homes (a rare experience for many international students) and attended the Sunday worship service. At the end of their weekend stay, some had already arranged with their hosts to connect over Thanksgiving! Beyond that, five students asked for Bibles. A note from a member of the church reads, “We are still smiling as we think back over the wonderful time we had with the international students.” Who knows what God will do in the coming days?⁷⁴

This type of discourse suggests that religiosity and hospitality in the South are not only connected but perhaps even inseparably linked. In other words, a comprehensive analysis of hospitality rituals in the South almost certainly *requires* a careful consideration of the region’s religious culture as well.

My approach acknowledges the long tradition of theological scholarship on Biblical hospitality⁷⁵ and brings into view the overlapping processes through which community members in Rockdale used the discourse and practice of hospitality to construct both their identities as Southerners and as Christians. Scholars from a variety of fields including sociology have used the South’s religious culture to help explain the social contexts surrounding dating, marriage, gender, and sexuality⁷⁶ as well as military service, gun ownership, and displays of violence.⁷⁷ I use a similar strategy by considering how religious beliefs and practices in Rockdale figure into the community’s understanding of Southern hospitality. Discursive approaches to the myth of Southern hospitality understandably lead many to wonder whether contemporary Southerners actually behave in any sort of uniquely hospitable way, and Szczesiul even suggests that the discourse of Southern hospitality “seems entirely emptied of any real meaning or higher ethical or moral significance,” that “we have largely lost sight of hospitality as either a moral imperative or

⁷⁴ Christianity Today, “Diaspora Missions,” emphasis added.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Mains’ *Open Heart, Open Home*, Russell’s *Just Hospitality*, and Pohl’s *Making Room*.

⁷⁶ Regnerus and Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America*; Barton, *Pray the Gay Away*; Moore and Vanneman, “Context Matters”; Carter and Borch, “Assessing the Effects of Urbanism and Regionalism on Gender-Role Attitudes, 1974-1998”; Vazsonyi and Jenkins, “Religiosity, Self-Control, and Virginity Status in College Students from the ‘Bible Belt.’”

⁷⁷ Ellison, “An Eye for an Eye?”; Ellison and Sherkat, “Conservative Protestantism and Support for Corporal Punishment”; Ellison et al, “The Enduring Puzzle of Southern Homicide”; Messner, “Regional and Racial Effects on the Urban Homicide Rate”; Reed, “To Live—and Die—in Dixie.”

an ethical question.”⁷⁸ In orienting my analysis around the intersection of hospitality and religiosity, my aim is to salvage the theoretical possibility that Southern hospitality continues to be practiced in meaningful ways while also foregrounding moral and ethical questions about the social implications of hospitality rituals in contemporary Southern communities. In short, I argue that the relationship between regional culture and religious culture in Rockdale offers us a way forward in understanding how the myth of Southern hospitality continues to be made “real” in the daily lives of contemporary Southerners.

A Study in and of the South

I relocated to Rockdale County in July of 2014, and while I had never spent much time in the community before then, I was already familiar with Metro Atlanta from having attended a local college and through several family connections in the area. After learning about trends in the county which reflect decentralized patterns of urbanization, industrialization, segregation, and immigration typical of many metropolitan areas in the South, I ascertained that it would be a good place to study themes related to regional culture and place-based identity within the changing Southern United States.

Over the course of two and a half years, I conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork by participating in a wide assortment of activities in the community. I feasted on fried catfish and hushpuppies at a meet-and-greet with a county commissioner, volunteered with a non-profit to advocate for children in the juvenile court system, shopped for fresh produce at a weekly farmers’ market, and took part in local gossip at my favorite hair salon. I mingled with my neighbors during annual events like the Hometown Holiday Parade and Olde Town Fall Festival and discussed local politics with them during town hall meetings and public forums. I participated in a book club that met once a week and dropped in on a coffee group that met each morning. I attended

⁷⁸ Szczesiul, *The Southern Hospitality Myth*, 13, 20.

birthday parties, baby showers, and baptisms; shared meals with families in their homes as well as mine; and accompanied parents to their children's karate classes, marching band performances, and theater productions. I joined in on countless religious functions as well, including church worship services, Bible study meetings, fellowship get-togethers, fundraisers, service projects, and holiday celebrations.

In addition to participant observation and casual conversation, I conducted formal, semi-structured and digitally-recorded interviews with 60 individuals including elected and appointed government officials, business-owners, teachers, clergy, life-long residents, transplants, immigrants, and parents and children from religious as well as non-religious families. In recruiting interviewees, my goal was to capture as wide a range of experiences as possible and to include diverse points of view on topics like place-based identity and change in the community. To that end, I sought out individuals particularly qualified to comment on specific types of experiences. For instance, I solicited the help of a Hispanic minister to recruit Latino immigrants and attended events organized by the local government to recruit influential community leaders and business owners. I also relied on well-connected individuals to introduce me to respondents who were otherwise difficult to meet in public settings, including for example elderly, long-time residents of the county and families affiliated with minority religious groups not represented by local congregations. Interviews took place in public settings like coffee shops and restaurants as well as private residences and workplace offices. During interviews with Spanish-speaking immigrants, I was assisted by a local bi-lingual translator.

Among these 60 formal interviewees were individuals from about 30 households who also allowed me to shadow their daily lives by accompanying them during activities of their own choosing. Some invited me into their homes for family meals and leisure activities while others asked me to accompany them to church, to work, or to a child's extracurricular activity. I offered interviewees who hosted me for extensive periods of participant observation their choice of a \$50 Walmart or Target gift card, and while many accepted the compensation, some politely declined it. After conducting fieldwork and interviews, I typed up detailed notes and arranged for interview recordings to be professionally transcribed. I also amassed a collection of multi-media data on

local community activity including newspaper articles, websites, photographs, and social-media exchanges. I used the software MAXQDA to qualitatively analyze this material using a refined coding scheme. With the exception of public figures who spoke to me on the record and agreed to be identified, I maintain the confidentiality of my research participants by referring to them with pseudonyms and by altering superficial details about their lives which might unintentionally identify them otherwise. Throughout my time collecting data in Rockdale, I have sensed that I am perceived alternatively as an insider or outsider depending on the context of an interaction. I undoubtedly benefit from the privileges enjoyed by white, middle-class, US-born, heterosexual women in general, and most people seem to perceive me as trustworthy and non-threatening. At the same time, my familiarity with Metro Atlanta has likely aided in my ability to quickly build rapport with many community members.

Studying regional culture as a sociologist is a decidedly unpopular thing to do. To speak of working-class culture and middle-class culture is common, but to speak of East Coast and West Coast culture or Northern and Southern culture is quite rare. Though the South is thought by many to be America's most distinctive region, sociological studies of Southern culture are scarce and discussions of what makes other regions culturally distinct are even scarcer. This is due in large part to the historic tendency for urban sociologists in America to generalize almost exclusively from Northern cases since, as Richard Lloyd argues, "regional idiosyncrasy confounds the search for generalizable laws of social behavior ... [and] ... Southern cities take shape in ways not well captured by the standard models of urban culture and morphology generated on the Northern prototype."⁷⁹ Rockdale and the larger Metro Atlanta area together reflect a history of industrialization, urbanization, segregation, and immigration that is unique to the region. Whereas densely-built, pedestrian-friendly cities in the North feature long histories of immigrant reception, ethnic diversity, industrialization, and more recently deindustrialization, Southern cities were historically characterized by agrarian rather than industrial economies, are

⁷⁹ Lloyd, "Urbanization and the Southern United States," 484.

relatively sprawled out and automobile-centric, and have only recently witnessed dramatic population growth and the arrival of large numbers of immigrants who complicate the region's black-white color line. Even though the South did eventually modernize, industrialize, and urbanize, the fact that these processes unfolded in distinct ways and had unique consequences has been incompatible with the demand for nationally generalizable theories, and as Wanda Rushing argues, today, "few scholars recognize Southern cities as real 'American' cities."⁸⁰

The legacy of this regional bias can be traced all the way back to the founding of American sociology. Early on, sociologists at The University of Chicago—America's oldest and arguably most prestigious sociology department—were concerned primarily with the dawn of modernity, the rapid urbanization, industrialization, and secularization of American society. They wanted to know, for example, how increases in diversity and density were changing urban communities, a question which has led many ethnographers over the years to study immigrant communities in Chicago,⁸¹ New York,⁸² and Boston.⁸³ Another stream of research documented changes brought on by black migration from the rural South to the urban North,⁸⁴ a trend which, in the words of historian Jack Kirby, "provoked alarm, curiosity, and research in northern universities."⁸⁵ The South however, as a markedly rural society, did not exhibit the modernizing trends which were of key theoretical interest to budding sociologists. In place of factories, one would have found cotton farms. Instead of densely-packed and ethnically-organized neighborhoods, one would have found blacks and whites strewn across tenant farms. Of course there were cities in the region, but Southern cities were not yet the hubs of economic activity they are today—the regional economy was still based on agriculture, and the majority of Southerners still lived in small towns or on farms. With the exception of scholars like John Dollard, who had

⁸⁰ Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox of Place*, 11.

⁸¹ See, for example, Wirth's *The Ghetto* and Suttles' *The Social Order of the Slum*.

⁸² See, for example, Rieder's *Canarsie*.

⁸³ See, for example, Whyte's *Street Corner Society* and Gans' *The Urban Villagers*.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Du Bois' *The Philadelphia Negro* and Drake and Cayton's *Black Metropolis*.

⁸⁵ Kirby, "The Southern Exodus, 1910-1960," 594.

an acute interest in black-white race relations,⁸⁶ and Howard Odum, who was hired by the Social Science Research Council to develop a regional plan for the economically depressed South,⁸⁷ sociologists generally saw no justification for studying Southern society. Over the years then, the regularity with which sociologists gestured toward the existence of a distinctive South without actually taking it up as a serious subject of study suggests that the discipline has long harbored a regional bias. Claude Fischer for example made casual reference to three very famous Southerners in an illustration of the theory of homophily:

So, although Scarlett O'Hara's passion for Ashley Wilkes over Rhett Butler turned on fascinating differences in the two men's personalities, the important sociological fact is that they were remarkably similar men (in race, age, status, culture, and so on) compared with the millions of men in the world, or even in Georgia. All but a relative few out of those millions had been ruled out of Scarlett's fancies long before the fateful events at Tara.⁸⁸

But of course, Scarlett, Ashley, and Rhett are not actually people—they are fictional literary characters from *Gone with the Wind*—and for a sociologist to make convenient use of make-believe Southerners instead of studying real Southerners in-the-flesh smacks of prejudice.

In what Lloyd labeled “the quantitative turn,”⁸⁹ trends in sociology eventually moved away from the Chicago school's ethnographic tradition and came to embrace the variable approach, a shift which transformed sociology into a discipline viewing people more as units of analysis than as social actors.⁹⁰ In this framework, the goal is to develop a grand theory, time and history are prioritized over space and geography, and generalizability is the coin of the realm.⁹¹ Described as the man “who almost single-handedly kept regional studies in sociology alive,”⁹² Reed argues that this emphasis on grand theory coupled with a tendency to overlook regional differences—

⁸⁶ Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*.

⁸⁷ Odum, *Southern Regions of the United States*.

⁸⁸ Fischer, *To Dwell Among Friends*, 5.

⁸⁹ Lloyd, “Urbanization and the Southern United States,” 484.

⁹⁰ Abbot, “Of Time and Space.”

⁹¹ Lobao, “A Sociology of the Periphery Versus a Peripheral Sociology.”

⁹² Griswold and Wright, “Cowbirds, Locals, and the Dynamic Endurance of Regionalism,” 1414.

particularly those between the American North and South—has made sociology into “a Yankee way of knowing.”⁹³ For example, cases selected from Northern locales tend to be held up as representative of national trends, while the small handful of sociologists studying Southern cases find that their conclusions are often marginalized as only regionally relevant. As Reed explains, “we know a great deal about the Northeast, but studies of that region are seldom seen as ‘regional’; they are, rather, thought to be ‘American.’”⁹⁴

It is in this tradition then that sociologists have neglected to seriously consider the influence of regional culture as they put forth supposedly nationally generalizable claims based on cases selected from Northern locales. For example, in the book *Playing to Win*, Hilary Levey Friedman uses a multisite ethnographic method to study families whose children participate in competitive dance, youth travel soccer, and scholastic chess.⁹⁵ She argues that middle- and upper-middle-class parents devote themselves to helping their children excel in these activities because they believe that doing so will ultimately earn their children entry into prestigious colleges and universities. She never reveals exactly where her field sites were located, saying only that they were somewhere in “the greater metropolitan area of a major northeastern city,”⁹⁶ and carries out her analysis using language implying that the families she studied are representative of families from across the country. Only a cursory endnote addresses the possibility that Northern culture might have had something to do with her findings. “The Northeast is known as a particularly competitive area” she admits, but because she “has had conversations with parents in various parts of America,” she concludes that “the larger issues [i.e. pressures to excel in competitive extracurricular activities] seem to be affecting elementary school-age children across the United States.”⁹⁷ Like so many others then, she quickly

⁹³ Reed, *One South*, 6.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁵ Levey, *Playing to Win*.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 251-252.

acknowledges that regional culture may in fact matter, but then swiftly proceeds to discount its significance before articulating her argument in general, nationally representative terms.

One of my aims is to contribute to ongoing efforts to correct this historic bias by building on recent work which has sought to revive the sociological study of regionalism, particularly the ethnographic study *of the South, in the South*. Matt Miller in New Orleans and Wanda Rushing in Memphis have each explained intersections of mass culture with local culture;⁹⁸ Timothy Nelson has illustrated lived religion among black congregants in a Charleston church;⁹⁹ and Zandria Robinson and Karyn Lacy have each illuminated various dimensions of identity among black Southerners.¹⁰⁰ Following in the footsteps of these and others, I hope to help convince mainstream sociologists of how important and relevant the study of regional culture really is. Lloyd argues that “the space of the American South has been left in a sociological black box,”¹⁰¹ and my dissertation helps to remedy this problem by providing a careful and nuanced analysis of the region’s legendary culture of Southern hospitality.

I begin in Chapter 1 by illustrating the significance of Rockdale’s master status as a Southern community. As residents imagined themselves to be members of a regional community of like-minded Southerners, they drew on the discourse of Southern hospitality to construct an image of Rockdale as a warm and friendly place, and in defending both the reputation of their local community and that of the entire Southern region, they perpetuated the idea of the hospitable South. At the same time, they negotiated competing and contradictory images of Southern culture as they considered what it meant for people to individually identify as Southerners. In Chapter 2, I highlight the elective affinity between Southern hospitality and Christian hospitality in order to frame the practice of hospitality as lived religion. Mutually

⁹⁸ Miller, *Bounce*; Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox of Place*.

⁹⁹ Nelson, *Every Time I Feel the Spirit*.

¹⁰⁰ Robinson, *This Ain’t Chicago*; Lacy, *Blue-Chip Black*.

¹⁰¹ Lloyd, “Urbanization and the Southern United States,” 484.

informed by their regional identities as Southerners and religious identities as Christians, local congregations employed the practice of hospitality to achieve a variety of goals in the community.

As Szczesiul points out, “the politics of hospitality is about determining who belongs and, more importantly, who doesn’t,”¹⁰² and in Chapters 3 and 4 I consider how the practice of hospitality was used to include some types of people while excluding others. First, I show how Christianity and regular church attendance functioned as important moral boundaries in the community and illustrate how non-Hispanic black and white Christians used the practice of hospitality to construct networks of reciprocity amongst themselves. By ritualizing those performances of hospitality which bridged the black-white color line, this majority group aimed not only to achieve racial reconciliation but also to redeem the South’s sullied reputation for racialized conflict and violence. Next, I explain how hospitality rituals were also used to emphasize rather than overcome difference by introducing the concepts of conditional hospitality, limited hospitality, and superficial hospitality. While the black-white Christian majority reaped the benefits of local hospitality rituals, this same group’s inhospitable or even hostile treatment of others served to exclude minorities and ultimately (re)produced social inequality in the community.

Overall, my analysis will explain how the practice of Southern hospitality has evolved to become more inclusive over time but still maintains its function of excluding those thought not to belong. Whereas the elite planter class once exploited their slaves in order to entertain guests with abundant food and drink, contemporary blacks and whites in Rockdale jointly understood hospitality as a traditionally Southern religious practice. Real strides were being made to overcome difference, but at the same time, certain types of people were still being excluded and marginalized. My argument will illustrate how Southern hospitality was used to cope with change in the community by welcoming some kinds of people and leaving others to feel unwanted, and that these practices were headed up by local Christian congregations will raise important moral and ethical questions about Christianity’s role in (re)producing inequality. Looking toward the

¹⁰² Szczesiul, “Re-Mapping Southern Hospitality,” 139.

future, the Southern United States will continue to be a site of significant social, economic, political, and demographic change. New neighbors and new ideas may render communities almost unrecognizable to their oldest residents, but I'll argue that whether different kinds of people ultimately feel like they belong will depend largely on how Christians choose to practice Southern hospitality.

CHAPTER 1

SOUTHERN LIVING: REGIONAL IDENTITY AS A MASTER STATUS

If you were considering a move to Rockdale County, Georgia, you might find yourself perusing information about the area online. Perhaps you would come across Carrington Real Estate Services, a company with listings across much of Metro Atlanta, and there you would find comprehensive guides for each of ten featured communities. Scrolling through the details about Conyers, Rockdale's only incorporated city, you would find the following information:

You'll Enjoy: Southern Hospitality Close to the City

Known for its southern charms, Conyers allows everyone to experience the simple southern lifestyle just a stone's throw from Atlanta. Surrounded by some of the most beautiful natural landscapes Georgia has to offer and centered around a bustling historical downtown full of unique shops, Conyers is a perfect fit for those who want the best of both worlds.¹⁰³

You would also learn that the community's available housing stock includes modern ranches, recently-built two-stories, and homes of the "classic southern plantation style," all situated on a "rural backdrop" which serves as "a relaxing southern-style retreat for commuters." You would be assured that "whether you prefer a classic southern estate with a wraparound porch or a quaint ranch outfitted with the most modern amenities, Conyers offers both at an affordable price."

If you were to visit Rockdale, you would find that a variety of spaces are brimming with symbolic references to the American South. A bumper sticker on one woman's Toyota Corolla reads, "American by Birth/Southern by the Grace of God," and a screen-printed t-shirt hanging in the closet of another reads, "Southern Girls Wear Pearls." A popular dining establishment is promoted as "a modern Southern American restaurant" and a fast-casual eatery sells a burger called "The Southern Belle." In the ladies dresses department at Belk hangs a large sign announcing that the store is "The South's Dress Address," and the names themselves of

¹⁰³ Carrington Real Estate Services, "Conyers, GA Real Estate."

numerous local businesses signify on the Southern region as well: Southern Staffing Services Inc., Southern Pipe & Supply, Southern Tire & Auto Service, Great Southern Wood Preserving, Community & Southern Bank, and Southern Real Estate Services. On facebook, a local woman describes how she makes it a point to greet people with a cheerful “good morning” when she visits the gym and then completes her post with the hashtag #Southerngirl. A decorative tea towel hanging in the kitchen of one home reads as follows:

The South
 The Place Where...
 Tea is sweet and accents are sweeter. Summer starts in April. Mac and cheese is a vegetable. Front porches are wide and words are long. Pecan pie is a staple. Y'all is the only proper noun. Chicken is fried and biscuits come with gravy. Everything's darlin' and someone's heart is always being blessed!

In another home sits a small accent pillow embroidered with an image of a magnolia blossom along with the message, “In the South/We Do It This Way,” and on an end table in a doctor’s office waiting area sits a stack of *Southern Living* magazines. Local newspaper *The Rockdale Citizen* regularly features articles like “Recounting the Pleasures of a Southern Oasis,” in which guest columnist Jack Simpson recalls relocating his family to Rockdale in 1955 and subsequently relishing the community’s “Southern hospitality, warmth and good neighbors.”¹⁰⁴ Also featured is a weekly syndicated column by best-selling Southern author Ronda Rich, whose articles include “Being a Proper Southerner Takes Time,”¹⁰⁵ “The South an Inspiring Place to be for Writers,”¹⁰⁶ and “Cranky Yankees Hard to Take.”¹⁰⁷

If you were to stay in Rockdale for a while and get to know some of the residents, or if you were to relocate there as I did and experience what it’s like to live in the area, you would find that Rockdale’s identity as a *Southern* community operates as its *master status*—its most distinguishing and consequential characteristic. Sociologist Everett Hughes first introduced the

¹⁰⁴ Simpson, “Recounting the Pleasures of a Southern Oasis.”

¹⁰⁵ Rich, “Being a Proper Southerner Takes Time.”

¹⁰⁶ Rich, “The South an Inspiring Place to be for Writers.”

¹⁰⁷ Rich, “Cranky Yankees Hard to Take.”

term “master status” in 1945 to conceptualize those characteristics of individual people which most profoundly shape their social identities, and typically the idea is used in reference to characteristics like race, class, gender, sexual orientation, occupation, or religious affiliation which overpower a person’s other, less-significant characteristics in a given setting.¹⁰⁸ Some characteristics function as master statuses due to their associated high levels of prestige, but others are explained by their associated negative stereotypes which are stigmatizing. Each individual person maintains multiple, intersecting identity statuses, but a person’s master status powerfully determines how they are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves.

The concept is usually employed in the analysis of individual identity, but adapting it for the purpose of understanding the identity of a place helps to explain the particular Southernness you would find in Rockdale. The image of a distinctive South forms the basis on which residents understand their local community, and processes through which individuals make sense of themselves as well as others are fundamentally structured by the meaning they invest in the idea of Southern regional identity. Rockdale’s additional noteworthy characteristics correspond to its many other intersecting and sometimes even contradicting statuses, but community members interpret these attributes within the larger symbolic framework of Southern regionalism. Indeed, when residents imagine where they live, the place that comes to mind is often the South in general, not Rockdale in particular. In other words, Rockdale’s master status as a Southern community serves as the primary point of reference through which residents subjectively experience, interpret, and make sense of the place they call home.

In this chapter I’ll illustrate how people in Rockdale drew on the discourse of Southern hospitality to conjure up evocative images of a distinctive South and explain how these images served as cultural anchors in the construction of Rockdale’s identity and the defense of its reputation. Then, in turn, I’ll explain how Rockdale’s master status as a Southern community figured into processes by which residents constructed place-based, individual identities as they

¹⁰⁸ Hughes, “Dilemmas and Contradictions of Status.”

navigated the respectability and credibility of various stereotypes and images associated with Southern culture. Throughout, I'll emphasize several moralizing dimensions of the discourse of Southern hospitality and argue that it functioned primarily to maintain a sense of self-righteousness for Rockdale in particular as well as for the South in general.

A Warm and Friendly Place: Constructing the Community's Identity

A History of Change in Rockdale

A long view of Rockdale's history reveals a pattern in which many of the community's key characteristics at any point in time eventually became fundamentally altered by significant social, political, ecological, economic, and demographic change. For instance, Rockdale's beginnings as a sparsely populated rural landscape were overwhelmed by the explosive population growth brought on by suburban-style development projects, which ultimately transformed the community's status as a provincial island-unto-itself into that of a highly-sought-after country-suburb of Atlanta. The county was first officially recognized by the Georgia State Legislature in 1870, and by 1880 there were only about 7,000 people living there. The community was predominantly rural—its principal industry was agriculture, its largest employer a cotton mill—but a train depot located in Conyers, the county's only town, bustled with activity as farmers and cotton brokers transported their goods to market via the railroad. Along with its surrounding schools, churches, saloons, lawyers' and doctors' offices, retail shops, and government buildings, the depot functioned as a centralized hub of business, transportation, and leisure for outlying farm families who made weekly trips into town via horse and buggy. This reputation as a quaint railroad town continued to characterize Conyers for several decades in spite of steady population growth, but it was suddenly disrupted during the 1960s with the installation of Interstate 20 right through the center of the county. Along with the rise of automobiles, the development of I-20 diminished Rockdale's sense of rural isolation by connecting it directly to downtown Atlanta—located just 25 miles away—and allowing it to better function as part of the larger metro area. Toilsome trips into Atlanta which previously would have been reserved for special occasions were

suddenly transformed into easy drives of only half an hour or so, and as a result, the community attracted what one local historian described as a “growing population of commuters who wanted the serenity of a small town in which to live and still enjoy the ability to commute to their jobs in the city.”¹⁰⁹

The interstate project ushered in a new era for Rockdale, and the image of a rural farming community dissolved as suburban-style development transformed the county into a feasible option for those seeking a bedroom community near Atlanta. New commercial and residential amenities were located along state highways and other major roads connected to interstate exits. Major thoroughfare Highway 20/138 gradually became lined on both sides with big-box grocery stores, fast-food restaurants, and strip mall conglomerates as rural, arable land and heavily wooded lots were transformed into subdivisions featuring family-friendly floorplans. These features, as well as high-quality public schools and low crime rates, attracted a large number of newcomers to the area throughout the following decades, and between 1970 and 1980 alone the county’s population doubled in size from roughly 18,000 to approximately 36,000.¹¹⁰ During that same decade, Rockdale and nine other counties were officially added to the United States Census Bureau’s Atlanta Metropolitan Statistical Area. Originally defined for the 1950 reports as containing only three counties—Cobb, DeKalb, and Fulton—the Atlanta MSA grew to include more and more counties over time as surrounding areas like Rockdale witnessed steady development and population growth. This trend continued on until the metro area was officially renamed the Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell Metropolitan Statistical Area which today contains a total of 29 counties.

Reflecting on this frenzied pace of suburbanization, one native of the community, Ron Watson, an older white man who continued to operate a family farm on the same land where he was raised, wistfully recalled Rockdale’s former status as a quiet and bucolic farming community.

¹⁰⁹ Farmer, “Conyers, A Product of the Transportation Age,” 26.

¹¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, “Preliminary Estimates of the Intercensal Population of Counties, 1970-1979”; U.S. Census Bureau, “Intercensal Estimates of the Resident Population of States and Counties, 1980-1989.”

“Our closest neighbor was three or four miles away, you know, back in the 50s, where now we’re surrounded by neighbors.” He looked out the large window of his home office, surveying his lush acreage and well-manicured fence-rows. Shielded from view by a strategically placed line of cypress trees were several subdivisions built on what used to be family farms like the one he had preserved. After a brief pause he continued by wondering aloud about just how many people had moved into his immediate vicinity. “I have, I guess, 300 maybe 400 neighbors around me—I don’t know how many neighbors I have.” Later, Ron gave me a tour of his property, and from the driver’s seat of his large pick-up truck pointed out various fields along with barns, workshops, and other outbuildings. He described routinely rotating his small herd of cattle from one pasture to another, but the two tracts of land he pointed out were separated by a busy road connecting many of the area’s subdivisions to the district’s local elementary school. Having grown up on a family farm myself, I knew a little bit about moving cattle and asked whether he encountered much difficulty stopping traffic to make way for his herd to cross. “Oh you wouldn’t believe it,” he chuckled as he proceeded to describe the scene for me:

You should see these people when we stop them and the cows start coming through. They get out their cell phones and start taking pictures like they’ve never even seen a cow before! And they don’t have a clue about how to be safe. One lady got out of her car and asked if she could pet one of the cows. “No lady—you’re gonna get killed. These are big animals. They’re not dogs!” I’m afraid somebody’s gonna get kicked [by a cow] and then take me to court. I don’t need that!

Ron’s frustration with his new neighbors is indicative of his more general understanding that the rural, farming community of his childhood was no more. Whereas stopping traffic to move cattle might have once been commonplace and unremarkable in Rockdale, many of the county’s newcomers regarded an operating family farm as something to stop and marvel at.

Today, Rockdale’s varied landscape chronicles the community’s history of vast ecological transformation. Olde Town Conyers, the historic downtown district originally built up around the train depot, is known as a quaint neighborhood with “character” and speaks to the community’s origins as a hub of trade and commerce in the region’s historically agrarian economy. Streets of adjoining, brick storefronts house an assortment of locally-owned businesses including the

Beasley Drug Company which features an old fashioned pharmacy and soda fountain, as well as a ballet school, ice cream parlor, coffee shop, and salon and spa. The popular restaurants Thai Palace and Las Flores are locally owned and operated and tend to impress guests in search of “authentic”¹¹¹ rather than mass-produced or unduly Americanized dishes. Similarly, The Point Bar, Whistle Post Tavern, and Celtic Tavern promote themselves as local, neighborhood joints offering informal libations and entertainment late into the night. The area’s relatively narrow streets lined with ample sidewalks and streetlamps make the neighborhood especially suitable for walking as opposed to driving.

Surrounding these shops and restaurants are various historic establishments including the stately county courthouse and related government offices, the restored train depot which now functions as the Conyers Welcome Center, and the ornate First United Methodist Church and Conyers Presbyterian Church buildings, each over 100 years old. The charming and well-maintained facades of historic bungalow homes in Olde Town feature deep porches filled with swings, rockers, and potted plants, and in December, meticulously arranged strands of sparkling outdoor lights and evergreen wreaths pinched with bright red bows. Given the neighborhood’s “authentic” ethnic restaurants, locally-owned businesses, and restored historic homes, residents of Rockdale described Olde Town as having a certain old-fashioned and charming feel to it, a sense that small-town customs and local history were being preserved.

Many other districts in Rockdale bear witness to its history of rapid suburbanization during the 70s, 80s, and 90s. Peering straight down Georgia Highway 20/138, a main thoroughfare right off the interstate, one’s field of view is cluttered with brightly lit signs for numerous fast food chain restaurants. McDonald’s, Domino’s, Starbucks and many more each advertise their latest promotions on large marquees and window banners, and dotted among these are sit-down, family-style restaurants, casual diners, and buffets, also of the chain-variety, including Ruby Tuesday, Waffle House, Golden Corral, and Cracker Barrel. A smattering of

¹¹¹ See Grazian’s *Blue Chicago* for more on the consumer demand for authenticity.

immigrant-owned, casual-dining Mexican and Chinese restaurants offer the sort of Americanized dishes popular in suburban locales. Retail shopping in this district consists of well-known big-box stores like Walmart, Target, and Home Depot, regional grocery store chains like Publix and Kroger, popular department stores like Kohl's and T.J. Maxx, and smaller specialty stores with locations across the country like Payless ShoeSource and Dressbarn. One large but vacant strip mall along the highway suggests that these developments have a somewhat temporary or transitory quality and could easily become neglected or abandoned. During the busy morning and evening rush hours as well as in the late afternoon, the highway becomes congested with traffic as people line up to enter or exit the interstate or pop in at local stores and restaurants. With few locally-owned establishments and little historic architecture, this zone looks much like any number of other suburbs in Metro Atlanta and other cities as well.

Away from the busy commercial section along the highway, Rockdale is dotted with countless subdivision developments. Many feature neatly arranged homes of very similar design and formal, landscaped entrances where decorative signs proclaim the subdivision names: Laurel Woods, Honey Creek, Milstead Place, Druids Keep. Others have a slightly more spontaneous appearance with custom-built homes dotted among wooded lots and winding roads. Some subdivisions feature amenities like pools, tennis courts, and clubhouses, and many post celebratory banners at their entrances each spring to announce the names of graduating high school seniors who live there. Clusters of these developments further from town are typically anchored by their own nearby commercial areas including basic amenities like grocery stores, pharmacies, and gas stations.

Still other areas in the county gesture to its heritage as a rustic farming community, and away from Olde Town and Interstate 20, subdivisions and shopping centers gradually give way to rural countryside. Homes have a far-less mass-produced appearance and are situated on larger plots of land. Some are large estates with hundreds of acres featuring massive barns, grazing cattle, and napping horses all enclosed by well-maintained wooden fences, and others are more modest in size with vegetable gardens, chicken coops, and roaming house pets. Still others look quite old and shabby and suggest that once-thriving family farms have fallen on hard times, their

rusting John Deere tractors and empty silos appearing to no longer be in use. Driving through these relatively sparsely-populated areas, intersections occasionally feature a small gas station selling bait and tackle or a tiny church accompanied by a simple cemetery. Taken together, these ecologically distinct sections of Rockdale tell a story of transformation from its status as a small, rural community dependent on the railroad for its business dealings in the South's postwar cotton economy to that of a bustling suburb with easy access to Atlanta as well as an economy integrated with the larger metro area.

More recently, Rockdale's population has not only continued to grow but also to diversify, and its heritage as a majority-white community has been dramatically altered by the unprecedented arrival of numerous non-white newcomers. Black transplants include those who simply relocated from nearby areas in Metro Atlanta and others who moved to the South from other regions of the country in a trend dubbed "The New Great Migration."¹¹² Meanwhile, Hispanic and Latino newcomers have transformed Rockdale into one of the South's new immigrant destinations.¹¹³ In 2000, non-Hispanic whites made up 73 percent of Rockdale's population, but by 2013 that figure had declined to only 38 percent.¹¹⁴ Even though the county lost almost 15,000 white residents between 2000 and 2010¹¹⁵—a pattern many locals interpret as "white flight"¹¹⁶—overall, the total number of residents has continued to increase. According to recent estimates, the county's population of nearly 89,000 residents is now a minority-majority community in which blacks constitute 52 percent of the population while non-Hispanic whites make up 35 percent and 10 percent identify as Hispanic or Latino.¹¹⁷

Changes in the racial composition of Rockdale's population have been mirrored by the rise of prominent black figures in the community, including elected officials like Sheriff Eric Levett,

¹¹² Frey, "The New Great Migration."

¹¹³ See Marrow's *New Destination Dreaming* and Winders' *Nashville in the New Millennium* for more on immigrant experiences in new destinations.

¹¹⁴ Krogstad, "Reflecting a Racial Shift, 78 Counties Turned Majority-Minority Since 2000."

¹¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, "Rockdale County, Georgia Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin Tables for the 2000 and 2010 Census."

¹¹⁶ See, for example, the Rockdale Citizen's "Rockdale Citizen Poll for Nov. 18th, 2012."

¹¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, "Quickfacts: Rockdale County, Georgia."

a Rockdale native first elected in 2012; business people like Jaquacer Middlebrooks, named the 2016 Small Business Person of the Year by the Conyers-Rockdale Chamber of Commerce; educators like Samuel King, former Rockdale County Public Schools Superintendent and recipient of the Georgia Superintendent of the Year award in 2011; clergy like Pastor Eric Lee of Springfield Baptist Church, who reportedly grew his congregation from only 162 members to more than 7,000;¹¹⁸ and even local celebrities like sixteen-year-old Candace Hill, a star athlete who recently made a *New York Times* news headline when she became the first female youth runner to run the 100-meter dash in less than 11 seconds.¹¹⁹ The widely visible accomplishments of black residents like these have contributed to the growing sense that Rockdale is an attractive community for black families in search of opportunities to be accepted, supported, and even celebrated.

Rockdale's former status as a predominantly-white community has fallen by the wayside as a new image of a community holding great promise for black families has gradually emerged, and many black residents who moved to the area in recent years recalled the appeal of a community in which black people were represented among important positions of power and influence. Ruth Turner, a middle-aged black woman from a small, majority-white town in Alabama moved to Rockdale because she sensed that it offered unique opportunities for ambitious black people like herself. "I felt like I could go and get a piece of my pie," she explained. Sitting in a quiet recreational room at the assisted living facility where she works as a nursing assistant, Ruth described to me how her hometown was not known for championing people of color like herself. "I went to a majority white school. It had a lot of blacks, but most of the—if you had judges, lawyers—they were mostly white ... the high school principal and everyone like that was white." With little to no opportunities for achieving upward mobility, black residents were often looked upon with suspicion and unease, especially by white business

¹¹⁸ Springfield Baptist Church, "Our History."

¹¹⁹ Crouse, "16-Year-Old Sprints Right Into Professional Track."

owners. “You could still go into certain places, and they would follow you or try to say that ‘We don’t have a lot of money at the store,’” as if to suggest that black patrons were there only to commit robbery.

Given these circumstances, Ruth began to consider moving somewhere with a better reputation for its treatment of black residents, a place, in her words, “where I can go, and if I wanted to, or if I worked hard enough, that I could *own* something.” She knew other black people with similar desires, and many of them encouraged her to consider a move to Atlanta which was becoming more and more known as a bastion of opportunity for black Americans. “I knew a lot of people of color who said that when they wanted to actually expand their surroundings—‘Go to Atlanta. It’s an opportunity for you.’” Upon visiting the east side of Metro Atlanta, she was impressed with the visibility of seemingly successful black people in communities like Rockdale. “And then to come here where it was—where I could go in certain spots and maybe for a couple of days might not even walk into someone that was Caucasian. A lot of things were owned by people of color. That really got me.” Ruth’s account illustrates Rockdale’s reputation as an attractive community for black families, but what’s important is that this reputation is a relatively recent development. Not only did Rockdale formerly maintain a significant white majority for many decades since its founding, but communities all across the South, including Rockdale, have historically disenfranchised and exploited their black residents through practices like institutionalized slavery and forced segregation. This new status then indicates just how significantly Rockdale’s reputation has changed over time.

The Persistence of Rockdale’s Southern Identity

Multiple changes in Rockdale’s demographic profile as well as its built environment amount to a series of transformations in key characteristics of the county’s identity over time, and many of Rockdale’s reputations as a local community have subsequently proven to be temporary and fleeting rather than durable or long-lasting. But despite these changes, Rockdale’s master status as a Southern community has endured. In imagining themselves to be part of a larger regional community of Southerners, people in Rockdale constructed a community identity that

transcends even the most extreme changes in the size, shape, and color of their local environment.¹²⁰ In effect, multiple intersecting changes in the county's demographic and ecological characteristics were ultimately subsumed by its master status as a Southern community. The project of constructing and reconstructing this regional identity over time involved several discursive strategies, many of which made frequent use of references to the idea of Southern hospitality, and Rockdale's residents drew on its master status as a Southern community as a rhetorical device to articulate local changes within the interpretive context of a larger regional culture.

Some residents idealized images of the Old South and saw changes in Rockdale as diminishing those community characteristics thought to be especially indicative of traditional Southern culture. Patsy Jenkins, an elderly white woman born and raised in Rockdale, complained to me one day over coffee that the suburbanization of the community had eroded its appeal as a quaint, Southern town. "Oh, it's horrible. It's lost its Southern charm. It's just that we have been inundated and we have meshed with Atlanta and we're losing our identity." The encroachment of urban influences from nearby Atlanta represented a threat to her image of a pastoral and countrified South, and Rockdale's status as a convenient suburb of Atlanta indicated to her that people had become too fixated on access to urban amenities. "It's because people that are living here think that's the purpose of being near the city, near the interstate. They think that they live in Atlanta!"¹²¹ An additional concern of hers was the number of non-Southern newcomers who seemed to disregard standards of politeness and courtesy traditionally associated with Southern culture:

The Southern charm was the courtesy and not everything for everybody for themselves. I mean everybody's so wrapped up in themselves today and they aren't courteous going down the street. People don't open doors. Men used to open doors. It was a real Southern charm. I taught my boys to do that and they still do it and they get looks. That's the way I was raised and I wanted them to be raised that way. I'm

¹²⁰ See Anderson's *Imagined Communities* for more on the cultural roots of imagined communities, especially nations.

¹²¹ See Garner's "Perfectly Positioned" for more on the blurring of urban-rural boundaries in Rockdale.

glad they have that and they at least know that if there's an elderly woman, you don't slam the door on her. And it's the courtesy of the drivers. You can always tell they're not from here because they cut in front of you, they don't use blinkers. It's very disheartening to see your town turn that way.

From this point of view, Rockdale's ability to function as a suburb of Atlanta and to attract thousands of newcomers—many of whom come from outside the South—made the community seem less traditionally Southern, less like the romanticized image of the Old South.

Others welcomed change for the most part and interpreted recent developments as emblematic of the New South, a cultural category they saw as being no less Southern than the Old South. County Commissioner Oz Nesbitt, a black, middle-aged man originally from Augusta Georgia, moved to Rockdale in 2000 and subsequently witnessed much of the community's recent population growth as well as its transition from a majority-white to majority-black county. "I have seen the community change quite a deal—a great deal since I've been here," he said, nodding affirmatively as we sat chatting in his office. "Yes, there's been a major shift in demographics—African-Americans, Caucasians, more Hispanic. There's been a shift there without question." He described Rockdale's oldtimers and newcomers as a dynamic duo working together for the benefit of the entire community's future:

This is the way I really like to describe it right now. It's a good blend of the old-school and the new-school ... You have the natives of Rockdale County or Conyers who've grown up and been here all their life. These people are the pioneers who've made and built this community ... And then you have folks like me, folks who are implants. We came from elsewhere, other places. And now we've become a part of the fabric of Rockdale County. We're adding value to the community; we're giving them a new perspective, a new look, a new flavor, so to speak. So, when you take a little bit of the old-school, and you connect it with a little bit of the new-school, you get a great blend, a great balance of old and new.

When asked to elaborate on whether changes in Rockdale made the county seem any less Southern, he used a colorful analogy to argue that whether considering elements of the community which harken back to the Old South or those which gesture toward the New South, Rockdale is essentially a Southern community. "It's kind of like the Mounds and the Almond Joy candy bars," he said, with a twinkle in his eye. "Sometimes you feel like a nut—and sometimes you don't. And you can choose and decide—but you're gonna get coconut either way." He went

on to describe how changes in Rockdale have actually served to bring out a warmth in the community which Southerners are known for:

Conyers, to me, has always been a nice, quiet place to come home to, okay. But I've watched this community evolve in the 15 years that I've been here, where it's more warm—much more warm, more inviting. And what I mean when I say warm and inviting is, I think the people here have always been good people, but they're more interested in exiting their comfort zones than what this place had been known for. It was a sleepy, bedroom community. People came in from Atlanta and elsewhere from work, had dinner, and went to bed, and started all over again the next day. And they didn't interact or go outside of their comfort zones or the people, and places, and faces they were used to dealing with. Well, *you're* not from here. *I'm* not from here. And the faces and the places of this community have changed. And I think it has changed for the good. I'm happy to live here. I'm proud of this place. It's a warm, friendly place.

From this perspective then, the community's ability to cope with change and to incorporate newcomers serves as evidence of its Southern identity, its reputation as a warm and inviting community. However varied people's responses may have been, they simultaneously shared a common concern for what it means to live in a Southern community, and in searching for that meaning residents turned time and time again to the idea of Southern hospitality and its emphasis on good manners and warm welcomes as an important cultural touchstone.

Comparing the South to the Non-South

Drawing on the discourse of Southern hospitality to formulate responses to change ultimately reconstructed Rockdale's master status as a Southern community, and in imagining themselves as members of a regional community of Southerners, residents mobilized a variety of discursive strategies to invest the idea of a morally superior South with meaning. One common technique involved comparing the South to the non-South and asserting that Southern manners are more courteous, more gracious, and more hospitable. In particular, large cities like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia were typically used as foils to highlight what people perceived to be the most extreme South/non-South differences, and the Northern way of life represented by these cities was without a doubt the preferred target of ridicule and condemnation. The notion of

Southern hospitality is so legendary that people did not need to mention it explicitly in order to invoke its image. Indeed, all one had to do was say something disparaging about people up North being rude and suddenly the image of the hospitable South was thrown into sharp relief. For example, I asked one local business owner, a wealthy man who had travelled all over the world, “How would you describe the South, compared to other places?” He replied by leaning over slightly and raising his eyebrows for dramatic effect before stating, “Well, the Northeast *does not* have the manners.”

Those who travelled extensively for work seemed to love nothing more than to share their war stories of frigid and ill-mannered people they had encountered in major metropolises across the Northeast. One woman who works in sales described feeling snubbed by anonymous pedestrians in New York who seemed hurried and self-absorbed:

In New York and some other cities, you feel foreign because people just pass each other, and they're rude, and they're bustling, and they're busy, and they're not looking—whereas in Southern cities, people greet each other, and they speak to each other. They're friendly, hospitable. You know? Even in the restaurants, you'd get a warmer greeting from some of the Southern areas as opposed to—you know?

Thinking that she might have been making somewhat of an unfair comparison between a small city like Conyers and a massive one like New York, I pressed her on whether people in the busiest part of Atlanta might not sometimes remind her of people in New York. “No,” she retorted, “this is not a city/country thing—it's a North/South thing, for sure.” An elderly man who had built a successful software company and travelled extensively for high-stakes business meetings similarly described a stark difference between Northern and Southern boardrooms. In New York, he learned to skip over the initial small-talk and pleasantries he had become accustomed to in Atlanta. “It was very, very different. You went in the room, you were expected to sit down, and there was no, ‘Hi, how are you today? Good to see you again,’ all of that.” In his experience, business meetings in Atlanta remained “much more relaxed and more informal ... except in rare situations where you knew you had to get something important done maybe.” But even then he argued, “We could make a formal meeting firm and alive, but not heavy-handed like they do up there.” When I asked him how he explains these differences, he suggested that

Southerners are more generous, more likely to give people the benefit of the doubt. “Southerners bring you in until you may prove otherwise. They always give you the opportunity to be in.” But Northerners, “they are very, very slow to bring you in.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, never having visited a place located outside the South didn’t stop people in Rockdale from purporting to know what it would be like if they did go there. One man for example expressed concern over the fact that his teenage daughter planned to attend college in New York City. He admitted that he had never been there but described his mental image of the place as “just big city crowds, people bumping into each other and not really engaging with each other—busy, busy, busy.” Then, comparing that image to how he thinks of Rockdale, he continued, “I think here it’s not quite as busy, busy, busy. I think people do take a little more time to make some connections and build relationships.” Likewise, a woman who had spent most of her life in Rockdale admitted, “I’ve not been up north, like New York. Never been there. I’ve never been really anywhere besides maybe North Carolina.” Nonetheless, she imagined that New Yorkers exhibit comparatively less kindness and warmth than the people she usually interacted with in Rockdale. “You know, not as friendly at all and just very kind of closed-off and into themselves, introverted, into their own lives. And maybe that’s the way they grew up. I don’t know.” To support her claim, she furnished evidence from a conversation she had recently had with someone more qualified to speak on the subject:

So I met a guy in Walmart ... and I just happened to see the “NY” on his hat. And I said, “Oh, are you from New York?” And he said, “Yeah.” And then I started talking to him, and I said, “Well, what do you like about being down here?” He says, “People are more friendly ... down here you go down the street and people wave at you. Up there, uh-uh. They do not wave at strangers or talk to them.”

Another woman, an older native of Rockdale, also suggested that non-Southerners are especially reliable sources of information on the question of Southern manners. “The people that I know love to come to Atlanta—or, they love to come to *the South*,” she contended. I asked her what kinds of things they say, and she replied flatly with only two words, as if to settle the matter once and for all: “Warm. Friendly.”

Indeed, many of the people I spoke to who had moved to Rockdale from some place outside the region also described Southerners as exceptionally courteous and kind. One woman from Pittsburgh who had married a native Georgian even suggested that Northern transplants like herself have a diluting effect on the South's friendly character:

Let me tell you, my husband's people from the South—in Sparta, Georgia—they say that us Northern people, they came down here and made it worse, and I agree because I had a taste of the real Southern people. They're the most nice, kindest people I've ever met. You don't meet that too much now because you got different types of people from all different places.

Some transplants described having imagined the South to be a warm and inviting place long before they ever relocated there, and one woman for example recalled hearing her father use the same discourse of Southern hospitality popular with native Southerners:

When I was a kid we used to drive to Florida from New Jersey every year for Spring Break. My father, he would say all the time that even the toll booth people got nicer and nicer the further south you went. He'd say "they're so sweet, everybody was just so sweet." And so that was a huge thing that I grew up being told that people in the South were just so nice.

Occasionally some transplants complained that Southerners are actually far too gracious, too concerned with performing ritual pleasantries which ultimately seem impractical. "The thing that has frustrated me here is that people are sometimes over-nice," said one man. He gave an example of automobile drivers who disregard their own legal rights of way in order to show deference to other drivers:

There will be cars that will stop traffic. There's no stop sign. There's nothing. They're driving along and then they'll just stop to let this person pull out and you're like, "Dude, everybody's gonna die because of you! You can't do that!"

Another man described how interviewing for jobs in Rockdale tended to leave him confused about his chances of getting a callback due to the kind yet seemingly superficial responses he received. "Down here they were all sweet and all that, and then I'm like, 'Well, that went really well.' But honestly you have *no idea* what the people are thinking in there."

Defending Rockdale's Reputation

People in Rockdale used comparisons between the North and South to portray their community as warm and friendly, and in a related way they also used images of the hospitable South to defend their community's reputation against claims which could potentially tarnish its glowing reputation. One significant threat was posed by the sometimes tenuous nature of local black-white race relations, and the county's transformation into a black-majority community led many to speculate about the degree to which white flight from Rockdale was to blame. Convinced that their fellow white residents had been leaving due to the community's increased racial diversity, many of the white people I spoke with sought to distinguish themselves as open-minded and accepting of people of color. For example, one white, middle-aged man explained that he sees Rockdale's changing racial makeup as a good thing:

I think the demographic change in the last few years—well, I mean I guess if you sit and focus on it you could look at it from a negative perspective in the sense of “Hey, this community might not look as much like me as it did when I first moved here.” ... But listen, I think I like diversity and I don't want to be somewhere where everybody is the same ... I don't see it as negative. I just see it as a great melting pot.

Describing Rockdale as “a great melting pot” served not only to combat the notion that large numbers of white oldtimers would rather abandon the community than see it incorporate a new black majority but also to salvage the community's identity as a place where newcomers of any race are welcome. He went on to reference a recent article from the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* in which Jeremy Redmon describes dramatic “racial shifts” in counties like Rockdale.¹²² “I don't know if you saw the article in the AJC a couple of months ago, about Rockdale County being number one in the nation for basically—call it what it is, white flight.” He pursed his lips, blinked slowly, and shook his head in disapproval. “People will say, ‘Oh, you shouldn't say that,’ but it's true. It is what it is.” In the article, Redmon never actually mentions white flight per se; he only

¹²² Redmon, “Georgia Counties Seeing Racial Shifts amid Reversal of Great Migration.”

references a report from the Pew Research Center in which Rockdale is ranked as having the nation's largest *percentage-point drop* in white residents between 2000 and 2013¹²³—a measure which tells us how much the proportions of blacks and whites have changed but not how many blacks or whites have come or gone. In fact, in emphasizing the reversal of the Great Migration and citing a 230 percent surge in the county's black population during those same years, Redmon's prose could just as easily lead someone to believe that the 35 percentage-point drop in white residents is explained entirely by the arrival of non-white newcomers.

White people in Rockdale who mentioned the article to me largely seemed to interpret it as conclusive evidence that white flight had become a very serious problem, and even if they misinterpreted the cited statistics, other indicators like the departure of their own neighboring friends and family members had already primed them to look for signs of a white exodus from Rockdale. One older woman mournfully reported to me that some of her relatives had decided to leave the area. "My sister-in-law and all her family are moving. She is moving, and her son and daughter, and their families. They are moving their mother, too." She crossed her arms tightly and shrugged, indicating her dismay. "But I am not going to leave; I am happy where I am." Later in our conversation, she suggested that Rockdale's current white flight was directly related to Atlanta's former white flight several decades earlier. "I think it is crazy. I mean, I think we need to change things. The thing is though, a lot of people moved down here, I think, to get away from blacks, back in the '80s. So they came out to the suburbs, you know." A middle-aged man made a similar suggestion. "A lot of them moved out of Atlanta, got pushed or moved out by choice, out of Atlanta into the suburbs," he explained. "They moved out here in the '70s, and started developing these subdivisions and all that kind of stuff. And then they stayed out here, but now it's kind of like reversing, where people are moving back out."

¹²³ Krogstad, "Reflecting a Racial Shift, 78 Counties Turned Majority-Minority Since 2000."

Comparing U.S. Census Bureau figures from 2000 and 2010 reveals that Rockdale indeed lost almost 15,000 white residents over the course of a decade,¹²⁴ but numbers were not the chief concern for Rockdale's residents who worried that the public *perception* of white flight from the community would reflect poorly on its reputation as a hospitable place. In order to minimize the damage, residents turned to a variety of rhetorical devices aimed at buttressing Rockdale's credibility as a charming Southern community. One approach was to admit that some of the community's members are indeed quite racist, but to portray them as antiquated and largely irrelevant. "Just prejudiced old white people; that's what it is," explained one middle-aged white man in a casual tone, suggesting that these people were nothing to be concerned about. "If you want to talk to some of these old racists—what I call the 'GORP,' the Grumpy Old Racist Party—there's a bunch of grumpy old racists in the Republican Party. I hate to say it, but that's my assessment of it." In light of the fact that democrats—mostly black democrats, in fact—controlled the county's government, statements like these seemed to imply that racist types were not in power and therefore not to be taken seriously. Another tactic was to suggest that reports of white flight had been blown out of proportion, made into sensational stories which grabbed the public's attention but regrettably belied the reality of peaceful and productive biracial leadership in the daily life of the community. One white man who directs a local non-profit organization and therefore works closely with black and white representatives from numerous government agencies, civic organizations, and faith-based groups insisted that race is simply not a problem for the county's core leaders:

Well from my experience, the people that I work with, racial tension is not an issue because really, I think the more you focus on a problem the bigger the problem gets. The more you focus on the solution the smaller that problem gets. And so to me the solution is let's just roll up our sleeves, let's work together. It doesn't matter what color your skin is or where you're from or how much money you make or anything of that nature. For the people that I have the privilege of working with, race is not an issue ...

¹²⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, "Rockdale County, Georgia Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin Tables for the 2000 and 2010 Census."

So I think because of the demographic change that has been so drastic over the past few years, some people make it a bigger issue than it really is.

Arguments like these attempted to position personal experience as more reliable than media reports or government statistics, and in swearing that they had never personally experienced any racial tension, residents safeguarded Rockdale's reputation as an open and inviting community.

Claims that people of any color are welcome in Rockdale helped to support its image as a hospitable place, but paradoxically, residents also defended their community's reputation for hospitality by insisting that some types of people are in fact *not welcome*. The discourse of Southern hospitality therefore provided residents with a crucial multivocality allowing them to reject people who might have otherwise tarnished Rockdale's image as an open and inviting place. This phenomenon is especially well illustrated by a series of events involving local recruiting efforts made by the Ku Klux Klan. On Sunday, June 21st, 2015—just four days after white supremacist Dylan Roof massacred nine black congregants at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina—the Rockdale County Sheriff's Office began to receive complaints from local residents who reported finding KKK recruitment materials scattered in their yards and driveways. The flyers, which were tucked into small plastic baggies along with cellophane-wrapped peppermint and butterscotch candies, stated “this is an all white invitation ... Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan want you, white brothers and sisters, to come together as white [and] bring this country back right.” Others reported finding flyers placed on parked cars at the local Walmart shopping center, and those who tried calling the provided phone number were met with a pre-recorded message praising Dylan Roof. “We in the Loyal White Knights of the KKK would like to say hail victory to Dylan S. Roof who decided to do what the Bible told him,” said the recorded voice. “An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. They have spilled our blood too long. It's about time someone spilled theirs.”

The following day, a public announcement appeared on the Sheriff's Office facebook page which stated that the department would take the issue very seriously and determine whether criminal charges could be pursued. The post was quickly flooded with comments from citizens communicating that the Klan is not welcome in Rockdale:

Get rid of this trash!

We do not need or want this in our county. Thank you for being on top of this.

Disgusting. Get this trash out of our county.

Don't need or want that crap in our town.

That's horrifying!!! We don't have room for that kind of hate in this county!!!

Within the next couple of days, multiple news outlets picked up the story. Fox 5 Atlanta provided live coverage from Rockdale during an evening news segment in which journalist Claire Simms reported that after speaking with regular citizens as well as representatives from the Sheriff's Office, "Everyone seems to agree, this is no place for hate." A local woman interviewed for the segment asserted, "It's not gonna happen in this neighborhood. It's not gonna happen in Rockdale County," and Sheriff Eric Levett proclaimed, "We most certainly don't want this here in our county." National news outlets reported that similar events had transpired in communities across Alabama, Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, New York, and California as part of a nationwide recruiting effort,¹²⁵ and National Public Radio's Scott Simon suggested that "those fliers in the bags might remind us why children shouldn't take candy from strangers."¹²⁶ CBS 46 Atlanta quoted one local woman as saying, "We are doing good here and we don't need the racism because everybody is trying to get along,"¹²⁷ and Rockdale County NAACP president Gary King held a press conference saying, "It's their First Amendment right, but we also have a right not to want it in our community. Hatred and bigotry is not something that moves our community and our nation forward. It has no place in Rockdale County."¹²⁸

¹²⁵ See, for example, Briquet's "Lollipops of Hate."

¹²⁶ Simon, "Little Baggies of Bigotry Broadcast a Hateful Message—Paired with Candy."

¹²⁷ Murphy, "Uproar Caused After KKK Flyers Dropped on People's Lawns."

¹²⁸ Marbaugh, "KKK Flyers Refer to Voicemail Praising S.C. Shooter."

The people I spoke to in Rockdale similarly decried the Klan's hateful, racist message and insisted that organizations promoting white supremacy do not belong in the community. One elderly woman said, "It makes me sick. We should be past that. I just don't understand it. I am sure it is still around somewhere because people are still going to believe that way. But, there is just no room for that ... there is just no room for that here, anywhere." In the weeks that followed, residents frequently pointed to Rockdale's inhospitable response to the Klan as evidence of the community's high moral virtues. Oz Nesbitt, the county commissioner originally from Augusta, praised the people of Rockdale for standing in solidarity against the organization:

I think it's important that the law enforcement and community leaders don't take it for granted and don't take it lightly, and we be alert and be aware, as we all should be. But we sent a strong message, and I think we did a great job with it, too, as a community. Black and white, of all ages, said, "Hell no, you're not gonna take control of our community." It was people of all demographics, all cultures in our community saying, "We're not standing for it. You're not welcome here."

Rockdale's residents seemed to let out a collective sigh of relief as the swiftness with which they had rejected the Klan somewhat ironically reassured the community of its identity as a place where all are welcome.

Defending the South's Reputation

In defending Rockdale's reputation from threats like apparent patterns of white flight and widely publicized visits from the Ku Klux Klan, residents frequently pivoted to the larger project of salvaging the South's reputation from its broader history of racialized conflict and violence. For example, when I asked Sheriff Eric Levett about the community's reputation, his answer quickly turned to the South's reputation. "I think people still think we've got a little ways to go and that we're still divided." Sitting in a well-appointed conference room at the same government complex where the county jail is located, his stiff posture and relaxed tone of voice together conveyed a quiet confidence. "Everything goes back to race. Race. A lot of people still think Rockdale County still shares some of the other Southern race problems, and it's just not the case, really." He continued by explaining that he makes it a point to disassociate his office from the image of a

South marked by racial discord. “That’s the part that I like to distance myself from because it’s not me. I’m a firm believer in let’s get along. Let’s understand each other. Let’s believe in each other, and let’s work together.” Through this type of rhetoric, residents framed their own community’s reputation within a larger context of regional history and culture and ultimately reconstructed the image of a distinctive South. And in the same vein, residents of Rockdale tended to interpret attacks on their community’s reputation as criticisms of the entire Southern region.

An especially vivid example of this is provided by the community’s reaction to an August 2014 front page *New York Times* story in which journalist Richard Fausset portrayed the city of Conyers as ripe for a rise in racial tensions:

... Only one of the six elected positions in this municipality of 15,000 is held by an African American, even as a wave of new black residents has radiated out from nearby Atlanta, creating a black majority here for the first time in the city’s 160-year history. Disparities between the percentage of black residents and the number of black elected officials are facts of life in scores of American cities, particularly in the South. The unrest that followed the shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., has emphasized how much local elections can matter, and prompted a push there for increased black voter participation ... Ferguson has become a vivid example of the way a history of political disengagement and underrepresentation can finally turn toxic.¹²⁹

The author goes on to consider a variety of explanations for why it might be that the black majority in Conyers has not elected black representatives to serve on its city council. He considers the low visibility and odd-year scheduling of city elections, the transient nature of black renters who presumably do not feel invested in local politics, and the socioeconomic disparities between blacks and whites which make serving in time-consuming yet low-paying public roles more feasible for white residents who tend to hail from privileged, professional-class backgrounds.

¹²⁹ Fausset, “Mostly Black Cities, Mostly White City Halls.”

While the *New York Times* may not be widely or regularly read in Rockdale, this particular article certainly captivated the attention of the community's leaders and boosters who expressed their outrage at the idea of a Northern intellectual mischaracterizing their own hometown. The chief complaint was that a narrow focus on the city government in Conyers had given off a negative impression which would have been directly contradicted by a broader view of the county government whose jurisdiction includes all of Rockdale, including Conyers. Given Fausset's choice to emphasize the underrepresentation of black elected officials at the city level instead of the overrepresentation of black elected officials at the county level, some in Rockdale were quick to label the writer as a prejudiced know-it-all from up North. One elderly black man lamented that the history-making achievements of the county's black leaders had been overlooked:

Do they not know that the Sheriff is the highest-ranking man in the land? This county elected a black sheriff. He ran and he won. And lots of other black people ran and won, too. But they come down here and they don't want to talk about that because that isn't what the story needs to be. Of course they come down here and find the one thing where they can say that people in the South are so bad, so racist. Because that's the story. That's the story about the South when you're up there.

To be fair, the article did in fact acknowledge a stark contrast between the city and county governments and even included brief mentions of the multiple county positions occupied by black elected officials:

In Rockdale County, of which Conyers is a part, countywide elections are held in even years, and offer a compelling contrast with city politics. The county underwent a demographic shift similar to the city's, with its share of black residents jumping from 18 percent to 46 percent between 2000 to 2010. The first black commissioners in county history were elected in 2008, most likely benefiting from the black turnout produced by Barack Obama's first presidential bid. In 2012, an all-black "Slate of Eight" candidates, all of them Democrats running against white Republicans, won most of the elected positions in county government. Before the election, a door-hanger was distributed with their faces prominently displayed, as well as the message "Support our President; Elect Rockdale Democrats on November 6th."

But overall, the piece's content and tone were perceived to reflect poorly on the community in particular and the South in general, which provoked rhetorical efforts to redeem the reputations of each.

Some voiced their frustrations that Rockdale in particular had been targeted and sought to counter the article with their own analysis of the situation. One local pastor, a white man originally from New York, posted a link to the article on his facebook page along with the question, "Do I need to write a letter to the editor to let them know how well people of all colors work in the non-profit and church sectors?" Several friends of his replied by egging him on. Another local pastor, this one a black woman, commented, "I was interviewed and photographed for this article but I guess the nonprofit/church sector wasn't intriguing enough. A couple of other pastors were also interviewed [and] their thoughts didn't make the cut either." "This is a very negative, slanted, misguided piece that contributes to the racial divide in our country. Please write a letter with a knowledgeable and balanced view of Conyers," begged one white woman, and "Yes—please write that letter to the editor. Let's educate the NY Times about what we are doing together here," said another.

Others in the community articulated a more general frustration with what they perceived to be only one example of a larger trend in which Southerners are roundly and routinely criticized by those outside the region who stubbornly refuse to turn the mirror on themselves. One older white man's reaction for example was to portray Northerners as hypocritical for looking down on the state of Southern black-white race relations. Having lived in Connecticut for several years, he recalled sensing that Southerners were known there mostly for "how bad they treat blacks" but complained that the Northerners he got to know failed to acknowledge their own problems with racism. "I saw how they didn't really do it better up there," he insisted. "They just didn't talk about it. They really didn't." Coming from a different angle, one late-middle-aged black woman argued that even though the South's history is indeed riddled with horrific examples of violent racism, it is also characterized by triumphant anti-racism. "What sort of reputation do you think the South has?" I asked her. "Well, I don't think it's a positive one," she said with a sigh. As an example,

she brought up the frequency with which comedians and political pundits make punchlines out of Southern stereotypes:

You can watch comedians like Bill Maher—and I'm a fan—but he can say, "the South," and the audience will just fall out laughing, and he doesn't even say anything else. You know, "It's the South," and everybody will go, "Ha, ha, ha." ... They think Southerners are backwards and lazy and slow ... They think that maybe we were not well-educated and not well-read and well-bred.

But from her perspective, Southerners deserves more credit, especially black Southerners like her parents who were active in various social justice movements over the years including organized efforts to desegregate Macon, Georgia. In defending the South's reputation, she chastised Northerners for not giving her region its fair due:

I think they forget it. I think they just forget it. They forget that the Civil Rights struggle was *won*—here in the South, that the whole world was *born*—here in the South. They forget that. They forget that it was *Southerners* who marched across that bridge with Northern allies. They forget that it was *Southerners* who had to fight those battles long after those allies were going back to their homes.

As residents like these employed various discursive strategies to defend both their own community's reputation as well as the South's, they ultimately reinforced Rockdale's master status as a Southern community and reinvested images of the hospitable South with significant meaning.

Warm and Friendly People: Constructing Individual Identities

Managing the Respectability of Southern Identity

To argue that Rockdale's master status is that of a Southern community says nothing of the master status of each individual person living there, and in fact, I would argue that other characteristics such as race or religious affiliation tended to function as master statuses for Rockdale's residents most of the time. But identifying as Southerners was indeed very important for many, and this identity was sometimes amplified to the level of a master status when

individuals travelled north and became especially aware of the regional characteristics which set them apart. One middle-aged black man for example journeyed to Philadelphia for several days of training with fellow police officers and reported feeling strangely unwelcome:

The people were different. They treated you different. To me, I don't think they were—the hospitality to me was not inviting. I didn't feel that warm, welcoming feeling coming in while I was there in some of the places that you go ... They just weren't the greatest help. I was like, "Where can you get a good Philly cheesesteak?" I was interested in Philly sandwiches, finding where can I have the best Philly sandwich. We couldn't even get anybody to tell us where was a good place to get a Philly sandwich.

While he admitted harboring preconceived notions of rude Northerners, he nonetheless related his surprise that he didn't feel a sense of belonging among professional peers. "Even with the police officers there, to me it wasn't friendly; they weren't even nice to other police officers," he lamented. "They didn't give me that friendly, welcoming experience ... I don't know, to me it wasn't—the hospitality just isn't there." In comparing himself to a group of Northerners who seemed not only unfriendly but also foreign and unfamiliar, the officer comfortably emphasized his regional identity as a Southerner which was in that instance associated with good manners and warm welcomes. But other popular images of the region's culture, many of which are negative, compete with that of the gracious and generous Southern host, and identifying as a Southerner therefore often involved some degree of hesitation and trepidation.

Residents of Rockdale were all too aware of the many ways in which Southern history and culture can have stigmatizing effects on their individual identities as Southerners.¹³⁰ One young white woman for example felt sure that Southerners tend to be regarded as backward and unintelligent by those living up North:

I know for a fact a lot of them think we're stupid, that we're ignorant because we talk slower ... I know this for a fact because my mom used to be an operator for a company ... and a lot of people from the North would call and be very insulting and say, "You dumb crackers can't do anything down there, can you? I bet y'all come to work barefoot, don't you?" And that's their opinion, a lot of them ... and the guys I

¹³⁰ See Goffman's *Stigma* for more on the socially discrediting effects of stigmas on individual identities.

dated [who were from the North], some of them would ask me, "Are your parents cousins?" That's their opinion. That's what they were taught.

When I asked her why she thinks it is that Northern people have come to hold Southerners in such low regard, she suggested that "we only have ourselves to blame" because not enough care has been taken in curating a positive public image of the South:

You know, really honestly, they always put the dumbest ones on the news. They always put some idiot on the news that speaks from their butts and doesn't know what they're talking about. And it aggravates me. I'm like oh, that's a good impression for the rest of the world to have of the South.

Others seemed to be mostly concerned about the possibility of their Southern identities implying to others that they hold racist points of view. I asked an elderly white woman for example what it means to be a Southerner, and she replied, "Unfortunately the first thing that comes to my mind is racism ... that's a negative side of it and as long as I'm living and probably as long as you're living, we won't ever get rid of racism in some way." She went on to explain that she often associates shame and guilt with her regional identity because of the pain and suffering blacks have endured at the hands of white Southerners:

I think we have done terrible things. I think we have done really bad things. I don't have anything to compare it to ... We bought them for doing stuff and they are just as human as we are. But, we didn't let them go to school with us, and they still think about that. We don't want them in our neighborhoods—I am not talking about me, I am talking about the South. You know a lot of people still want it to be segregated, and I think they think about that.

The immediacy with which people like this woman identified themselves as Southerners was therefore not always met with equally quick claims of regional pride and moral superiority.

In describing those negative characteristics associated with the South which they find most embarrassing, many residents pointed to the image of the Southern redneck as epitomizing multiple dimensions of generalized Southern stigma. And in many of their imaginations, the Confederate flag is perceived as the equally embarrassing redneck badge-of-honor. One white man for example, a successful local business owner, complained that some of his neighbors take pride in the flag when, in his opinion, they ought to simply regard it as a historical artifact from an

era which actually reflects poorly on their Southern heritage. “It’s not that you need to forget what happened,” he argued, “but the ding-dong running up Georgia 138 with the U.S. flag and the rebel flag flying in the back of his pickup truck—I saw him doing it the other day—it’s like, you *big, dumb redneck*.” He elaborated by explaining his wife’s perspective on the matter:

She keeps telling everybody she hates that rebel flag because we were losers. Why do you keep wanting to raise the fact that we were losers? We lost the Civil War, we were traitors, we were trying to secede from the Union. To her, that’s a sign of losers and a sign of secession and a sign of traitors ... The rebel flag heritage pride thing—she thinks they’re all a bunch of idiots.

Indeed, native Southerners in Rockdale had good reason to be concerned about what the flag symbolized to outsiders and newcomers, especially given that so many of the transplants I spoke to similarly classified it as racist, inappropriate, and altogether embarrassing. One young white man, who had recently moved to Rockdale from the West Coast, tried diligently to rationalize the pride he observed some people associating with the flag. “I didn’t really grow up here, so I don’t get it. I know some people don’t think it’s like a racial thing, but to me it just symbolizes—like even if you can take the race thing out of it, it’s like anti-America, right? Because that’s what it was all about there.” Completely befuddled, he wondered aloud, “But I guess some people grew up with it and they don’t look at it as racial? They just look at it as like a Southern thing? I don’t get it.”

When asked whether they are proud of their regional identities, many of Rockdale’s native Southerners hesitated, and their carefully-crafted responses indicated that they wished to distance themselves from these negative stereotypes associated with Southern culture. I asked one middle-aged white man for example, “Do you think of yourself as being Southern?” “Oh yeah,” he answered, before quickly qualifying his response:

Now it depends on how you define “Southern.” If you just define it as geographic heritage, then yeah, but if you define it as “I’m Southern, I’ve got my Confederate flag, I’m a good old redneck white boy,” I don’t consider myself that.

I followed up by asking him why he felt the need to explain himself so thoroughly. “I guess especially recently, because of the tragic events in Charleston and the Confederate flag issue,” in

reference to Dylan Roof's massacre and subsequent debates over the flag's public display, "when the media picks out someone and just hands them a microphone, then people may have a tendency to think everybody in the South is that way." He went on to critique the use of the Confederate flag to represent Southern pride:

I personally feel we do need to get rid of the Confederate flag. Put it in a museum. Yeah, it's part of the history. You can't erase it, deny it, but still I don't think it is something that needs to be displayed in a proud kind of a way, but that's just my personal feeling ... I know people that are very passionate about the Confederate flag and whether or not I would say that they are racist—I think for some people that's a symbol of their Southern heritage and for some it's a racial symbol.

He concluded by articulating what he means when he identifies himself as a Southerner:

"Courtesy, respect, friendliness—those kinds of adjectives, to me, define 'Southern.'" In defining the concept this way, white residents used the discourse of Southern hospitality to negotiate multiple, competing images of what it means to identify as a Southerner.

Even though black Southerners may not have worried about being labeled "big, dumb rednecks," they nonetheless tended to use similar strategies to distinguish between which Southern characteristics they do and do not take pride in.¹³¹ For example, when I asked County Commissioner Oz Nesbitt what he thinks it means to be Southern, he replied, "Racism, number one. Bigotry, number one. Slow, number one. All those things I just mentioned are the negatives." But then he continued with a passionate inventory of the many aspects of Southern culture with which he proudly identifies:

Here are some of the positives. Loveable, sweet, best cooks, Bible-based, church-going, family, family reunions. We're warm, fuzzy, touchers type people. We're tangible. We're the group that loves on America. That's who we are. We love to cook. We want you to eat every time you come to our house. We want you to feel good. We're passionate. We really care. That's who Southerners are. We're hard workers. We're MacGyvers—we make things happen, we figure it out. That's who we are. Don't mess with our Bible. Don't mess with our babies. That's who we are. And

¹³¹ See Robinson's *This Ain't Chicago* for more on how black Southerners participate in redeeming the region's reputation.

we like to hunt, we like to fish, we like big trucks. Food and music are our most common denominators.

“So, I guess you would say you identify as a Southerner, then?” I asked. He chuckled, acknowledging that my question was a rhetorical one, and then provided the following answer:

I am a true Southern gentleman, yes indeed. Yes indeed, I am. I still say, “Yes, ma’am; no, ma’am; thank you, sir; excuse me; please; you’re welcome.” And I get irritated by the folks that don’t use those mannerisms and that are not polite. I like to cook. I like to eat. I like good music. I love soul music. I love gospel music. I like country music. I like bringing people together. I love church. I do.

By carefully distancing themselves from stigmatized images of bigoted and ignorant Southerners, both black and white residents of Rockdale maintained a sense of pride in their individual regional identities as they used the discourse of Southern hospitality to portray themselves as warm and friendly people.

Negotiating the Credibility of Southern Identity

Among Rockdale’s newcomers were many people who had relocated from other regions of the country, and for those transplants who found themselves feeling at home in the South, questions arose about whether they could ever or should ever identify as Southerners. Many transplants emphasized that they feel a sincere affinity for native Southerners in the area but nonetheless never quite go so far as to adopt the Southern regional identity themselves. When I asked one young black man originally from Chicago whether he thinks of himself as a Southerner, he explained how his last ten years in Rockdale have left him unsure of how to answer questions like that:

At this point, like I’ve been here so long that I pretty much say things like “y’all” and stuff all the time. But, I don’t know. I guess a lot of the Southern values, like being nice to people and whatnot, and saying hey, and opening the door and stuff like that—well, I was kind of raised like that anyways. So yeah, I don’t know.

The question became even more complicated for families in which parents had relocated to Rockdale either when their children were still very young or before their children were even born. In these cases, children who were born and raised in the South to parents who hail from other regions of the country complicated common-sense definitions of who is and is not a Southerner, and clarifying this boundary sometimes became a contentious process.¹³²

Greg and Linda Webb, originally from New Jersey, and their three young-adult children who were all raised in Rockdale provide an especially illustrative example of this. As I sat perched in a comfortable living room chair cuddling their friendly house cat one evening, Greg and Linda described having moved to the Atlanta area in order to escape the strain of high-pressure jobs, expensive real estate, and competitive schools in the suburbs of New York City. In search of a slower pace of life, Greg left his Wall Street banking job and moved with Linda into a then-brand-new Conyers subdivision. They were immediately smitten with what Linda described as the area's "Southern, polite, gentle, church, Bible-belt culture," as well as its affordable cost of living and high-quality public schools, but they also felt self-conscious of their status as outsiders. Linda in particular remembered feeling like a misfit among the credibly Southern women in her subdivision:

The little neighborhoods had Christmas parades and all the women in the neighborhood would get together and make Christmas sweatshirts together. I remember the first time I went and everybody was introducing themselves and when I spoke, just speaking with my pretty strong New Jersey accent then, and all these Southerners were there, and I thought, "I want to sing 'Which of these things is not like the other? Which just doesn't belong?'" ... People told me later that when they first met me they had not-a-very-good impression of me because of the way I spoke ... I used to feel much more left-out and excluded because I was not Southern, like I didn't fit in. My closest friends here that I still connect with most easily are also from the Northeast.

Experiences like these made Greg and Linda only more intent on instilling traditional, Southern values in their children with the hope that they would grow up to become well-mannered, bona

¹³² See Lamont and Molnár's "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences" for more on symbolic and social boundaries.

fide Southerners. As Linda recalled, "I remember the first day when I yelled to my son, 'Samuel!' and he yelled back, 'Ma'am?' and I said 'Ah! Finally!'" Once their children grew older, Greg dissuaded them from seriously considering colleges in the North even though they might have been able to continue a family legacy by attending Brown University, the Ivy League school located in Providence, Rhode Island. "Two of mine wanted to go to Brown, to be the third generation in our family," Greg explained, "but we were like, no." "When our son was applying to Stanford and to Vanderbilt," Linda interjected, "we were very happy he went to Vanderbilt, because we raised him to be a Southern gentleman. We are not Southerners, but we raised our son to be one."

Overall, Greg and Linda felt confident in having achieved their goal and described their children as identifying very strongly as Southerners. To illustrate this point, they shared what happened when their daughter accepted a summer internship in New Jersey and spent those months living with a cousin. "The person she stayed with, our niece, is a Jersey girl," explained Linda, "and my daughter would call me crying sometimes and say, 'They're all so mean!'" "Nothing like *Jersey Shore*," cut in Greg, "I mean, they're really highly educated, but also in-your-face." Linda nodded in agreement and continued, "She was just like, 'They're all so mean right here. I want to come back home where they don't say mean stuff right to your face.'" Already familiar with the regional differences their daughter was encountering for the first time, Greg and Linda couldn't help but laugh. "It's just the in-your-face personality," Linda said. "Whereas here in the South they'll say, 'bless your heart' and then hate you behind your back, in New Jersey they're right in your face." "There's no buffer," Greg added, "and that's it." Stories like these served to bolster the Webb children's credibility as Southerners, but over the years, others in Rockdale had communicated their skepticism to Greg and Linda. One particularly memorable comment came as a response to a casual remark Linda made about having raised three Southern children. "Just because a cat has her kittens in an oven," said the woman, "that doesn't make them biscuits."

The experiences of the Webb family vividly depict many of the ways in which Rockdale's residents preoccupied themselves with negotiating the defining differences between Southerners

and non-Southerners. Just as the concept of Southern hospitality afforded residents the symbolic multivocality necessary to respond to change in their local community either positively or negatively, it also supplied them with the rhetorical content needed to maintain a sense of moral high ground, reputations and identities they could be proud of. In other words, the discourse of Southern hospitality provided structure both to the construction of the community's identity as a warm and friendly place and to the construction of individuals' identities as warm and friendly people. While this discourse made regular reference to practices like using polite manners and treating others with courtesy and respect, in the next chapter I'll move past these somewhat superficial claims and illustrate how the myth of Southern hospitality became manifested as embodied religious practices, thereby setting the groundwork for an analysis of Southern hospitality's consequences within the local community.

CHAPTER 2

TAKE ME TO CHURCH: LIVED RELIGION IN THE BIBLE BELT

Dorothy Henderson, a 90-year-old white woman who had spent nearly all her life in Rockdale, looked at me with glassy eyes as she thoughtfully formulated a response to my question, “Do you believe Southerners are hospitable people?” She seemed slightly taken aback, and answered me hesitantly, “Well, some are, and then some are not, I guess.” She paused and bit down on her suddenly trembling bottom lip as if trying not to cry. Then, hanging her head and clutching her collarbone out of apparent sorrow, she whispered, “But that’s one of my *greatest sins*.” Realizing I had unintentionally struck a nerve, I apologized, but Dorothy waved gently, indicating that no apology was necessary, and quickly began to explain herself. “This is sad, but my Mama had several—well, they didn’t call them mental breakdowns, but she’d have breakdowns, you know?” I nodded yes, eagerly assuring her that I understood. She went on to explain that her mother had never received the mental healthcare she needed because the family couldn’t afford to pay for it. “You know the difference between alcoholics and drunks, don’t you?” she asked. “No,” I said, “tell me.” “Alcoholics are the rich folks, and drunks are the po’ folks. And all of my folks was drunks.” We both chuckled, brightening the somewhat dark turn our conversation had taken.

Dorothy recalled that her mother’s condition often prevented her from keeping the family’s home in proper order. “Mama was not a good housekeeper—it was clean, but it was cluttered,” she explained. The family did not normally entertain, but after experiencing a tragedy they were suddenly flooded with customary visits from uninvited guests. “We come from a small family, and when my stepfather died all the church people came in and all. I was a little 11-year-old young’un, sitting over there, all these people swarming, bringing food in, you know.” Dorothy’s small, bright eyes flooded with tears as she explained what happened next. “I sat there and heard them talking, these ladies talking to each other. And they said, ‘Oh, she’s an awful housekeeper,’ and ‘We don’t know what to do,’ and all this, that, and the other.” She shook her head in disapproval at the cruelty of the gossiping houseguests and described the profound impact it had had on her:

It did something to me—I just never let folks come in my house very much. When they talked about Mama’s messy house and all, that’s the reason I don’t want nobody to come in here, because they would say, “Oh, she lives in a messy house.” And I’m not a good housekeeper. Some people come and they might say, “Oh, we love your house all messed up, with all your books around, and all that stuff.” But then, some people would maybe say, “Oh, Miss Dorothy, I don’t know why she don’t straighten up all these books and stuff.”

I glanced around her parlor where she had very graciously invited me to sit, and confirmed that nothing appeared to be notably cluttered. The fireplace mantle was tastefully adorned with framed family photos, and a variety of attractive coffee table books were arranged in a neat stack before me. “I would say you have a beautiful home though, and you welcomed me in without too much thought,” I commented. “Well I let people come in here,” she said, meaning the room we were presently sitting in, “but that’s it usually.” She pointed out into the foyer toward two doorways explaining, “That one goes back to my bedroom, and that one goes back to the kitchen. I don’t like to let people see where I pile up my dirty clothes and pile up my dirty dishes.”

Dorothy had likewise made it a habit over the years to refuse the imposition of uninvited houseguests even though she felt guilty and ashamed for doing so, and among her fellow churchgoers in particular, she came to be known as an inhospitable figure in the community:

At church, they’d ask, “Well, we’ve got visitors coming to sing in the choir, or this and that. Will you let them sleep in your extra room or something?” No. I just don’t like folks that I don’t know nothing about, and I don’t like to entertain. I’m not one that gets out all that crystal, china, silver, and all that stuff.

Attempting to offer some consolation I said, “Well, I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t want people in my house either if they treated me like that.” “But it’s not right,” she insisted, “I know it’s not right to be how I am.” Invoking her identity as a Christian to help explain why she agonizes over having not attained the ideal image of a charming Southern hostess, Dorothy explicitly ascribed a sacred status to the practice of Southern hospitality by referring to inhospitable behavior as her “greatest sin.” From her point of view, hospitality is more than a mere discourse aimed at imagining a distinctive region—it’s a set of embodied practices she feels compelled to take part in, a moral duty she feels obligated to fulfill.

Stories like Dorothy's are indicative of the religious context in Rockdale which fosters people's understanding of hospitality as a Christian moral imperative just as well as a Southern cultural tradition, and in this chapter I'll explain how the discourse of Southern hospitality became manifested as *lived religion*—the embodied religious practices of everyday life. Religious Studies scholar Robert Orsi popularized the lived religion approach and described it as a careful attention to how “religion is shaped by and shapes the way family life is organized,” including for example “how the dead are buried, children disciplined, the past and present imagined, moral boundaries established and challenged, home constructed, maintained and destroyed, the gods and spirits worshiped and importuned and so on.”¹³³ Compared to traditional approaches which focus more narrowly on theology, doctrine, and clergy, the concept of lived religion was introduced as a way of widening the purview of religious studies to include the beliefs and practices of regular laypeople. For instance, church historian David Hall promoted the interdisciplinary study of lived religion as a perspective uniquely concerned with both formal, officially-sanctioned ceremonies which take place in designated sacred spaces like sanctuaries as well as colloquial rituals which unfold in ordinary spaces like public squares and private homes.¹³⁴

The concept of lived religion helps to makes sense of how people invest the idea of hospitality with meaning in two important ways. First, it draws on Durkheimian traditions in sociology to consider the significance of a community's shared sacred symbols in creating and maintaining moral order, thereby orienting analysis around the ritualization of otherwise banal customs.¹³⁵ This provides a framework for explaining how community members transform seemingly insignificant social interactions like hosting visitors and sharing meals into symbolic representations of their religious identities. As sociologist Penny Edgell explains:

A core task for the sociological study of religion is analyzing the empirical variation in practices oriented to sacralization, the institutions (religious and other) that facilitate

¹³³ Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, xxxii.

¹³⁴ Hall, *Lived Religion in America*.

¹³⁵ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

such practices, and the resulting religious experiences and moral orders that emerge in specific times and places.¹³⁶

Second, it links discourse and practice by foregrounding the analysis of narration, or “what people *do* with religious idioms,” in Orsi’s words, as they account for and reflect on their embodied experiences:

The interpretive challenge of the study of lived religion is to develop the practice of disciplined attention to people’s signs and practices as they describe, understand, and use them, in the circumstances of their experiences, and to the structures and conditions within which these signs and practices emerge.¹³⁷

In short, the lived religion approach aims to take seriously the everyday beliefs and practices through which people experience their own spiritual selves and articulate their own moral claims.¹³⁸

In order to explain how people in Rockdale translated the discourse of Southern hospitality into religious practice, I’ll first show how the elective affinity between Southern hospitality and Christian hospitality made it possible for them to interpret a wide variety of rituals as epitomizing both the Southern tradition of extending warm welcomes and the Christian ethic of loving your neighbor as yourself. Then I’ll illustrate how hospitality rituals pervaded multiple facets of lived religion for the community’s church-going Christians. Whether defining their distinct denominational identities and inviting newcomers to visit their churches or evangelizing to “the lost” and ministering to “the needy,” I’ll argue that the practice of hospitality was fundamentally important to the institutional maintenance of Rockdale’s local congregations.

¹³⁶ Edgell, “A Cultural Sociology of Religion,” 255.

¹³⁷ Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, xix-xx.

¹³⁸ See Nelson’s *Every Time I Feel the Spirit*, Bender’s *Heaven’s Kitchen*, and Glassman’s “In the Lord’s Hands” for more on the sociological study of lived religion.

Warm and Friendly Churches: Translating Discourse into Practice

Conflating Southern Hospitality and Christian Hospitality

That people in Rockdale tended to conflate Southern hospitality with Christian hospitality is explained in large part by the elective affinity between the two concepts.¹³⁹ To be sure, the image of a gracious Southern host shares a certain coherence with that of a neighborly Christian, and for many of Rockdale's residents, the notion of hospitality resonated with both the regional and religious dimensions of their identities. This phenomenon was reflected many times in the Christian preaching and teaching I observed as local clergy explicitly referenced the culture of Southern hospitality to help laypeople grasp Biblical references to the practice of hospitality during Jesus's day.

For example, Pastor David Armstrong-Reiner of Epiphany Lutheran Church leveraged the elective affinity between Southern hospitality and Christian hospitality to explain the parable of the Good Samaritan in a newspaper column for the *Rockdale Citizen*.¹⁴⁰ Responding to a growing controversy over plans for a Muslim mosque and cemetery to be developed in neighboring Newton County, the pastor argued that in order to understand just how shocking the parable would have been to ancient Jewish ears, contemporary Christians ought to imagine the role of the Samaritan being played by a modern-day Muslim American:

Have you ever considered how radical the parable of the Good Samaritan is? Read Luke 10:25-37 ... The story takes on a deeper challenge to Christians today when we consider how Jews in the day of Jesus thought about Samaritans. After all, who were the Samaritans? Samaritans claimed the same ancestry and the same God as the Jews. Samaritans claimed the same right to the land as the Jews—for the most part, they were the ones who stayed behind during the Babylonian Exile. They both held the Torah—the first five books of the Bible—as their inspired guide to faith. Yet, Jews rejected the faith of the Samaritans ... Samaritans were considered half-breeds, inferior to the “purity” of the Jews. Jews believed that they should not associate or talk

¹³⁹ See Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* for more on elective affinities.

¹⁴⁰ Armstrong-Reiner, “Judge Others by the Love They Show.”

with the Samaritans. So, when Jesus tells a parable in which the neighbor, the one who helps, is not the priest nor the Levite but the Samaritan, he offended his listeners. His point is that we do not judge others by what we think we know about them. We do not judge others by their beliefs. We judge them by the love they show, even as we are called to show our faith in love.

If Jesus were to tell this parable in 21st-century America, he would have used Muslims instead of Samaritans. Think about it. Muslims claim the Abrahamic heritage and the same God as we do. Muslims claim the same right to live here as free and practicing American citizens as we do. Muslims even honor Jesus, mentioning him more often in the Koran than Mohammed himself. Yet, we have allowed a radical extreme to define an entire religion, an extreme that Muslims condemn throughout the world, even though the media rarely reports it. We do not allow the Ku Klux Klan to define Christianity. Nor should we allow this radical extreme to define Islam.

Indeed, many Christians in the area seemed to view Muslims as a threat, and local news reports indicated that initial responses to the building project had been “mostly critical.”¹⁴¹ The Newton County Board of Commissioners took action by placing a moratorium on permits for properties used as places of worship, a move which allowed them time to review the situation and get input from locals. Hundreds showed up to a public hearing which made international news headlines, and *The Economist* reported that “the views of the majority were vitriolic” in spite of the “Southern manners” with which they were articulated:

Many of the speakers straightforwardly denounced Islam for its supposed violence and extremism. They predicted that Covington [the county seat of Newton County] ... was set to become a hell of violence and jihad, in which their families would no longer be safe. “They’ll kill Jews, Christians, anyone that don’t believe in Allah,” said one internet-expert. He suggested that his would-be neighbours rip out errant pages in the Koran to prove their good intentions. “If you don’t believe like they do,” said another, “you get your head cut off.” Islam, declared a young man, is “a death cult.” “This is not a religion,” a female church minister insisted.¹⁴²

A few weeks later, the controversy made headlines again when county commissioners canceled a meeting which was expected to result in an end to the moratorium. As *The Washington Post*

¹⁴¹ Queen, “Reaction to Mosque Plans Mostly Critical.”

¹⁴² *The Economist*, “Covington’s Planned Mosque.”

reported, security concerns had been raised by a self-described militia group's plans to organize armed protestors at the county courthouse.¹⁴³ Although the meeting was cancelled, a handful of militia members showed up anyway, including one who was photographed wearing a t-shirt which read "Islam is of the Devil."¹⁴⁴

In his column, Pastor Armstrong-Reiner insisted that the community should display greater hospitality, and in doing so he made appeals to his readers not only as Christians, but as Southerners too. He described feeling "disturbed and distressed" by locals who had "shouted out such hate-filled, fear-based, and often ignorant rhetoric" and compared them to the Bible story's priest and Levite characters, inhospitable figures who serve as foils to the kind and generous Samaritan. "These voices do not represent the Jesus we believe in, the one who reached out to the unclean, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, and even the Samaritans. These voices rather represent the priest and Levite in Jesus' parable, the ones who would walk on by, stuck in their prejudices and fears." Then, arguing that Christians should instead promote tolerance and champion religious liberty, the pastor urged his readers to embody Jesus's teachings on radical hospitality by extending warm welcomes to their Muslim neighbors. "So I call upon us as believers in Jesus to welcome these Muslim brothers and sisters into our community ... I call upon us to show the same *Southern hospitality* that any other newcomer would receive."¹⁴⁵ In suggesting that Rockdale's Christians have a moral duty to welcome their Muslim neighbors, the pastor implied that Southern hospitality and Christian hospitality can be practiced jointly, through rituals which simultaneously symbolize the Southern legacy of genteel manners as well as the gospel teachings of Jesus Christ.

Pastor Liz Coates used a similar approach during a guest sermon at the congregation my husband and I had joined, Trinity Baptist Church, a small but relatively diverse and moderately progressive congregation affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a group which split

¹⁴³ Wootson, "Georgia Officials Were Set to Approve a New Mosque—Until an Armed Militia Threatened to Protest."

¹⁴⁴ Stokes, "Handful of Militia Members Protest Newton County Mosque."

¹⁴⁵ Armstrong-Reiner, "Judge Others by the Love They Show," emphasis added.

from the Southern Baptist Convention in 1991 over theological disputes about the organization's increasingly conservative bent. The scripture lesson for the week came from Luke 10:38-42, the story about Jesus's visit to the home of Mary and Martha which directly follows the parable of the Good Samaritan:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

In order to provide some historical context, Pastor Coates described how important the practice of hospitality was for women living in Jesus's time. "Societal roles of the day are being well-defined by Martha's actions—she deserves the kudos from Jesus, according to tradition," she explained. "Women work behind the scenes. They show hospitality, which is a huge deal in the culture of Jesus's day and time, by handling all of the rituals of welcoming an honored guest." She went on to say that the point of the story is to remind Christians not to become so distracted with insignificant details, as Martha did, that they fail to appreciate life's greatest gifts. The Biblical text portrays Martha's preoccupation with staging an impressive display of hospitality as wrongful, but Pastor Coates suggested that she is nonetheless a sympathetic character for Southerners who similarly value the idea of fussing over their houseguests. "Hospitality was no joke then in that part of the world, and it's no joke now. Y'all know—you're *Southern*. We are known for our hospitality, right? Martha sees it *our way*." As she continued, the pastor invoked the familiar image of a Southern hostess working eagerly to perfect every last detail. "When an important guest enters your home, you go crazy making sure everything is perfect and the tea is sweet enough and the pillows are fluffed and the house is in order and the chicken is frying to the perfect shade of brown and crispy." She concluded however by warning her audience not to obsess over these details, but to remember the importance of slowing down and savoring the moment. "The question Jesus presents us with is, 'Are we taking time to see who we really are,

or are we running crazy trying to show everyone else that we're good enough, loveable, and capable?' We're invited to stop, shut down the distractions, and look to Jesus to see God."

Whereas Pastor Armstrong-Reiner had argued that followers of Jesus are obligated to practice Christian hospitality, Pastor Coates instead emphasized that Christians should be careful that the practice of hospitality does not detract from what is most important, their devotion to Jesus Christ. Although the pastors' remarks differ in meaningful ways, what they share in common is an assumption that experiences with Southern hospitality have already familiarized their audiences with the basics of Christian hospitality. In drawing on the elective affinity between the two, Christian clergy like these confirmed that the discourse of Southern hospitality can be translated into embodied religious practice within the local community.

Competing for New Recruits

While clergy captivated their audiences with references to Southern hospitality, local congregations similarly practiced ritual niceties the South is known for as they sought to impress first-time visitors and ultimately recruit new members. In fact, many churches had established groups whose main task was to ensure that visitors received warm welcomes, and some churches even advertised these concerted efforts on their own websites. The "hospitality ministry" at Emmanuel Community Church for example was said to "represent and serve God by assisting and accompanying guests of the Emmanuel Family with a warm and friendly spirit,"¹⁴⁶ and visitors to Conyers First United Methodist Church were promised that "at whatever entrance you come in, you will be welcomed by a volunteer from our hospitality team [who is] available to greet you and answer any questions you may have."¹⁴⁷ Among the churches I visited, some featured rather formal procedures by which designated greeters offered me information packets and sometimes free gifts like coffee mugs or ink pens emblazoned with church logos and Bible

¹⁴⁶ Emmanuel Community Church, "Current Ministries—Hospitality Ministry."

¹⁴⁷ Conyers First United Methodist Church, "Where Should I Go?"

verses. Others tended to rely on a more casual approach as their most gregarious parishioners introduced themselves to me, made small talk, and perhaps extended invitations to lunch following the service. These differences aside, it was widely apparent that Rockdale's churches sought to incorporate the ethos of Southern hospitality into the religious practices by which they worked to attract prospective parishioners.

A particularly illustrative example of this is provided by a Sunday morning service at the historic First Baptist Church of Conyers, a large, mostly-white congregation affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.¹⁴⁸ My husband Andrew and I received an invitation to visit the church from Henry and Nora Whitaker, an older white couple we had casually befriended through a local business. "You two will have to come and worship with us one morning," Nora had said. "We would love the opportunity to show you a warm welcome, and I just know our friends would enjoy meeting such a fine young couple!" When I called to confirm our visit for the following day, Henry gave us specific instructions to wait in the church vestibule upon arriving. "I'll come find you and be your escort. That way you won't have to ask around to find our pew."

The church campus, custom-built in 2000 after the congregation outgrew their former location in Olde Town, certainly made an impression with its massive 60,000-square-foot, red-brick facility perched on a hill above Highway 138.¹⁴⁹ As Andrew and I pulled into the expansive parking lot, we noticed small signs indicating a row of spaces designated especially for visitors, and when we walked through the building's main entrance, a greeter offered us printed programs saying, "Good morning! Welcome to First Baptist—glad to have you!" Henry spotted us almost immediately and hurried over to greet us as well. "Come follow me, and I'll show you where we sit. Nora can't wait to introduce you to everyone!" The sanctuary was buzzing with activity as congregants made lively conversation, and Nora stood to envelop me in a warm embrace saying, "Oh I'm just so glad y'all could come and be our guests today!" Others sitting nearby also stood

¹⁴⁸ Barksdale et al, "First Baptist Church of Conyers"; Reagan, "First Baptist Church."

¹⁴⁹ Reeves Young, "First Baptist Church of Conyers."

to acknowledge us and slowly trickled over to say hello. Henry presented Andrew and me as “a nice couple visiting for the day,” and with each introduction people shook our hands and hugged our shoulders as they asked about our occupations, backgrounds, and hobbies. One family invited us to come to their house for dinner one night, and another gave us their contact information so that we could ask for advice about the local community if we needed it. Several people told us about the church’s Sunday school classes, young adults’ ministries, and fellowship events they thought we might be interested in, and one elderly woman handed me a small notebook and pen saying, “Name, address, and phone number. That way we can keep in touch.”

This initial impression reminded me of popular discussions within the larger evangelical community on how to increase church membership by impressing first-time guests. For example, self-described “church secret shopper” Greg Atkinson, who “grew up in a traditional Southern Baptist church,” makes a living by consulting with church pastors on this very topic, and in an article for ChristianityToday.com titled “6 Markers of Especially Welcoming Churches,” he writes that placing “the right people” in charge of practicing hospitality is of paramount importance:

When I say I like to see the right people serving in hospitality, I mean the best and the brightest—people with good smiles and friendly personalities. This should go without saying, but based on my experience, I need to say it anyways: hospitality is not the best place for those who are socially awkward. This is a guest’s first impression of your campus. Hospitality shouldn’t be an afterthought; it’s a priority.¹⁵⁰

In another article titled “Hospitality Matters,” Atkinson argues that “the Bible is full of stories illustrating the importance of practicing hospitality ... showing hospitality is one of the primary signs of a follower of Jesus—and a church that follows Jesus.”¹⁵¹ Justifying his claims of a “Biblical mandate” in which “God specifically commands his people to practice hospitality,” Atkinson quotes scripture from a wide variety of Biblical passages:

“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, you shall love him

¹⁵⁰ Atkinson, “6 Markers of Especially Welcoming Churches.”

¹⁵¹ Atkinson, “Hospitality Matters.”

as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 19:33–34, ESV).

“For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a *stranger*, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me” (Matt. 25:34–36, NASB, emphasis mine).

In 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7–8, Paul lays out important guidelines and criteria for church leadership. He tells the leaders of the church that they must be known for their hospitality.

“Seek to show hospitality” (Rom. 12:13).

“Be hospitable to one another without complaint” (1 Peter 4:9).

“Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to *strangers*” (Heb. 13:1–2, emphasis mine).

Read Acts chapters 16, 21, and 28. The Bible is full of stories illustrating the importance of practicing hospitality.

In fact, Jesus says that by loving others, others will know we are his disciples (John 13:35).¹⁵²

In other words, he argues that hospitality is not merely a Southern tradition but a Christian mandate, a religious practice through which followers of Jesus embody their obedience to God’s commands.

Atkinson continues by spelling out a rather exhaustive list of incredibly detailed instructions on how to make sure guests feel welcome and comfortable when visiting a new church for the first time. Parking lot attendants should be smiling and waving, welcome packets should be available at the Information Center, and congregants should take time to greet each visitor (“Why? Because friendliness puts people at ease. It helps them feel welcomed and safe.”) There shouldn’t be too many announcements during the service, the pastor shouldn’t be selling

¹⁵² Ibid.

his book in the lobby, and church members shouldn't speak too much Christianese. At the conclusion of worship, the pastor should announce that visitors are welcome pick up a free gift at Guest Services (Atkinson recommends "an individual microwave popcorn package, with a RedBox code taped to it, along with a coupon for a free pizza—"Dinner and movie!") Finally, church members should always offer to take their guests' families out to lunch after church because "this, my friends, is hospitality at its finest."¹⁵³ While the folks at First Baptist may not have implemented each and every tool in Atkinson's box, their concerted effort to make Andrew and me feel welcome was palpable, and their style of interaction evoked a sense of intentional church hospitality not unlike the practices Atkinson promotes.

Importantly, the sheer number of churches in Rockdale meant that individual congregations faced significant competition, and church-going Christians enjoyed the privilege of being choosy about which congregation to join. When I asked various parishioners about their experiences "church shopping," many described having assessed the displays of hospitality they encountered and accordingly joining congregations where they felt most welcome. One woman for example recalled a local church whose hospitality left something to be desired. "My mom and I went there and visited, but we were kind of discouraged because nobody spoke to us. Not one person. Not one person said, 'Hi, my name is such-and-such.'" When I asked her to elaborate on why she felt discouraged, she explained, "Well, as a kid visiting churches with my mom, you didn't leave a good church without somebody speaking to you." "If there was a good church that the people there were good people," she insisted, "they didn't let you leave without shaking their hand and saying, 'Hey, we're glad you came to visit today.'" "And that's why I try to do that at my church now so much," she continued, "because that makes a very big impact and a big impression."

Others recalled having been sufficiently welcomed as first-time visitors but then subsequently snubbed by long-time members who failed to extend hospitality on a continued

¹⁵³ Ibid.

basis. One such woman had visited a church for several months before finally accepting that she would likely never be invited to socialize with the church's elites. "I don't know, maybe it was me, but it seemed there was a clique in the church ... Some certain group belonged to the bridge club and had big parties every month." Pointing to herself, she continued, "And then some weren't included in that. You had to be special and so forth. But I never learned to play cards, and bridge is too fancy for me." She said she decided to go visit other churches because "it didn't feel good to be left out, you know." In a similar series of events, one man was reportedly "shocked" when he learned that members of the church he and his wife had recently joined were neglecting to invite them to a regularly-scheduled group lunch:

We would see these folks in there in Sunday school, and in church, and they were close and loving as could be. But we were there two years before I discovered one morning that about half that Sunday school class was going out to lunch and had never invited us to go out to lunch. Strange. What have you got to do to get invited to lunch? So we were part of them, but we really weren't part of them. I just happened to overhear them discussing it once, and I said, "Where are you eating?" I thought to myself, "I'm going to ask that because I want to come too." Because at that point we were not excluded exactly—we just weren't invited. And see, that's the thing. That was a shocker.

Frustrated that he and his wife should have to invite themselves to church-related social gatherings, they soon left and found a new congregation where a formal invitation to lunch is announced each and every week. "The one church I go to now, the first Sunday we're there, at the church we're going to now, someone gets up and says, 'We go to lunch every day, and today it's going to be here, and if you're new in here, we buy you lunch today.'" In evaluating churches according to how well their members honored guests with good manners and thoughtful invitations, Christians like these revealed how they thought the discourse of Southern hospitality ought to be manifested as embodied religious practices.

Distinguishing Denominational Identities

In a related way, Rockdale's churches also had an interest in differentiating their associated denominations from the countless other Christian religious traditions represented in

the community, and the task of distinguishing a congregation's orthodoxy and orthopraxy often involved explaining their denomination's unique approach to the practice of hospitality. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses are perhaps best known for canvassing local homes and businesses with free Bible-based literature, and during a weeknight meeting at a local Kingdom Hall, I observed church leaders train their medium-sized, mostly-black congregation on how to make appeals to the hospitality of strangers in order to initiate conversations with them. Two middle-aged men took to the stage to perform a skit illustrating how to effectively approach local businesses and obtain permission to share brochures with employees as well as patrons. Before the skit started, an emcee of sorts directed the audience's attention to a list of tips located inside pamphlets they had received and explained that the purpose of the skit would be "to show how important it is to be polite and show courtesy." "After all," he warned, "the business owner or manager will usually welcome you in at first, but you are a guest who could be asked to leave at any time."

Even though the Jehovah's Witnesses were just as interested in growing their congregations as people from other denominations, they made use of an entirely different logic as they incorporated the idea of hospitality into their religious practices. Whereas Christians from many congregations *extended* hospitality to others in order to attract them to church, the Witnesses I got to know said they *depended* on the hospitality of others in order to evangelize them. For example, I chatted with one young woman who spent upwards of 20 hours a week going door-to-door in Rockdale. When I asked what kinds of responses she typically received, she explained that even though some people used foul language or threats to run her off, many others complied with local standards of friendliness and sociability:

You do have some scary situations sometimes—people joking about getting out their guns and stuff like that. But a lot of people, especially if they say they are religious people who know the Bible and stuff, they will be nice to you and visit with you for a while even if they don't agree with our message and don't really want to learn about it. It's like they don't want to be embarrassed for being rude. So even if they aren't seriously interested, they will pretend to be a little bit interested just to be nice. But then you reach a point where they start saying that they have a lot to do that day and you know that they are ready for you to leave them alone.

Another Witness I spoke to, this one a middle-aged man who spends time canvassing the community with his family each week, explained how Christians from other denominations who rudely turned his family away are hypocrites for being so inhospitable:

The thing that really kind of tickles me is when you go and you meet somebody—all you have to say is you're not interested. You're busy. Just like if somebody called your house, you say now is not a good time, I'm eating dinner or whatever it might be. But when people say I'm a Christian already and they slam the door in your face? I'm saying to myself, "Well what are you learning? Because if you're a Christian already, are you reading the same thing we're reading?"

By highlighting the lack of hospitality they sometimes received from Christians who presumably lay claim to some version of Biblical hospitality themselves, Jehovah's Witnesses portrayed their own organization as more sincere and more authentically Christian than other denominations.

Subtle differences in how various churches practiced Biblical hospitality revealed fundamental theological disputes between Christian denominations in more formal, sacramental ways as well, including for example the rite of Holy Communion. The congregation at St. Pius X Catholic Church drew on the same discourse of Biblical hospitality that many Protestant churches did. A sign posted near one of the church's entrances read, "Stewardship Is: Hospitality, Prayer, Formation, Service," and a corresponding page on the church's website explained the role of hospitality in the church's mission:

Through ministry participation we further build and strengthen the bond that ties our families, our parish and the greater Church together. Our goal, of course, is to develop a practice of hospitality that we carry out into the world, to help us to go out and "make disciples." Through our participation in parish ministry, we are called to be living examples of Christian hospitality.¹⁵⁴

The congregation's outreach ministry included a "Family Dinner Hospitality Team" that organized monthly get-togethers featuring "food, fun, and fellowship,"¹⁵⁵ and their liturgy involved volunteers

¹⁵⁴ St. Pius X Catholic Church, "Stewardship."

¹⁵⁵ St. Pius X Catholic Church, "Outreach Ministries."

from the “Greeters Ministry,” people “with caring hospitality” who “open doors, guide newcomers or visitors, assist those with special needs, and answer questions.”¹⁵⁶ Despite the striking similarity between this discourse and that of many other denominations in the community, Protestants in Rockdale tended to take issue with the fact that Catholics practice closed communion, meaning that only other baptized Catholics are welcome to take part in the Eucharist during a Catholic mass. I was reminded of this when I attended Mass one Sunday at St. Pius with a Christian friend who, like me, was not permitted to partake in the Lord’s Supper. Having married into a Catholic family, my friend was relatively well-versed in Catholic practices even though she had elected not to convert to Catholicism herself. After taking our seats in the quiet sanctuary, she leaned over to me and whispered, “Just so you know, we’re not supposed to do the communion part. You can either go and walk through the line without taking the bread and wine, or you can just stay seated.” She opened a copy of the Catholic Missal, a book which contains the order of service for each week in the liturgical year, and directed my attention to an excerpt explaining the regulation of Holy Communion:

FOR CATHOLICS

As Catholics, we fully participate in the celebration of the Eucharist when we receive Holy Communion. We are encouraged to receive Communion devoutly and frequently...

FOR OUR FELLOW CHRISTIANS

We welcome our fellow Christians to this celebration of the Eucharist as our brothers and sisters. We pray that our common baptism and the action of the Holy Spirit in this Eucharist will draw us closer to one another and begin to dispel the sad divisions which separate us. We pray that these will lessen and finally disappear, in keeping with Christ’s prayer for us “that they may all be one” (Jn 17:21). Because Catholics believe that the celebration of the Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness of faith, life, and worship, members of those churches with whom we are not yet fully united are ordinarily not admitted to Holy Communion...

¹⁵⁶ St. Pius X Catholic Church, “Liturgy.”

FOR THOSE NOT RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION

All who are not receiving Holy Communion are encouraged to express in their hearts a prayerful desire for unity with the Lord Jesus and with one another.

FOR NON-CHRISTIANS

We also welcome to this celebration those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ. While we cannot admit them to Holy Communion, we ask them to offer their prayers for the peace and the unity of the human family.

Both my friend and I were personally accustomed to open communion, the practice by which most Protestant churches welcome all Christians to participate in the Lord's Supper regardless of denomination or membership status. At Trinity Baptist Church for example, where my husband and I often attended services, Pastor Joe LaGuardia emphasized Biblical hospitality each time he and the church's deacons offered the sacrament of communion. One Sunday, he said to the audience, "You do not have to be a member of Trinity to partake in communion with us. You do not even have to be Baptist. We only ask that you call Jesus Lord." Another time, he argued that the communion table should be "open to everyone" and insisted that "hospitality is the highest virtue from Jesus." For Catholics and Protestants then, the discourse of Biblical hospitality became embodied through the sacramental practice of Holy Communion, and by instituting different parameters around the ritual, various congregations carved out distinct denominational identities.

Building God's Kingdom

Churches drew on the elective affinity between Southern hospitality and Christian hospitality to attract dedicated congregants and promote their respective denominations, but they also attended to the institutional maintenance of their congregations by teaching parishioners how to make use of the practice of hospitality as they shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with their unbelieving and unchurched neighbors. In urging congregants to practice the same traditional Southern hospitality they were already accustomed to but with the added goal of building God's kingdom, Rockdale's clergy specified distinct practices through which the discourse of Southern hospitality could become manifested as lived religion.

Back at First Baptist Church for example, during mine and Andrew's visit with the Whitakers, Pastor Mark Marshal announced that the topic of his sermon for the day would be "Biblical hospitality" and confidently asserted that "hospitality is *all over* the pages of scripture." He referenced examples of especially hospitable characters from both the Old and New Testaments—Abraham, Nehemiah, David, Peter, and Paul—before calling everyone's attention to the Great Banquet of God described in Revelation and prophesied in Isaiah. "All of history is leading up to a great banquet where God is the host," he exclaimed, "Isaiah chapter 25 verse 6 says, 'The *Lord of hosts*.'" The implication of course was that practicing hospitality is sacred, that to embody the role of host is to mirror the very character of God himself.

The pastor continued by explaining that the ultimate purpose of playing host is to fulfill the Christian mission of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. To complete this mission successfully, he argued that Christians must practice hospitality in their local communities:

The more you and I become like Jesus Christ, the more we take on this core of being people of hospitality ... This is how people come to Christ ... If we are going to win people to Jesus Christ, we are going to do it using this strategy, if you want to call it that, or this step, of hospitality in our lives.

Importantly, he went on to translate this discourse of hospitality into real, embodied practice and provided his congregants with specific instructions on how to appropriately interact with potential converts in the local community. "What about throwing a party," he said, "inviting some people who you know are believers, that are Christians, and inviting some people that you know are not?" He addressed families with children in particular and articulated how parents should extend invitations to their non-Christian contacts:

Do your kids know that the purpose of your family is to be a missional team? ... Do they understand that the reason you're there is so that you can share Jesus Christ? When was the last time you had a family over to your house for dinner who did not know Christ for the purpose of getting to know them so you could share Christ? You bring your kids in, you set them down, you say, "Okay we're going to have the Joneses over, we're going to have them over to the house. They're not Christians. They're not followers of Christ. We're going to begin to build those bridges with them. So you're going to play with their kids. Their kids may not have the same values as you so here's how we handle that."

Of course evangelical Christians like those who attend Southern Baptist churches are known for proselytizing nonbelievers. Images of street-corner preachers and free Bible tracts come to mind. But Pastor Marshal warned his congregation that evangelism *requires* the practice of hospitality in order to be successful:

If you've never invited that next door neighbor into your house, you've never had that relationship, you never invited them out to dinner or anything else and then all of a sudden you just walk over one day and go "Hey, I would just like to invite you to church," that's going to be awkward. It's going to feel awkward. So you've got to have that relationship.

Based on this teaching then, seemingly mundane practices like hosting neighbors for a weeknight meal took on new meaning as Christians understood hospitality rituals to be a way of embodying their religious beliefs in the daily life of their local community.

The significance of Pastor Marshal's sermon cannot fully be appreciated without also noting the historical influence of Baptists in Southern society more broadly, because as historian Charles Regan Wilson explains, "Among the major features that differentiate the South from the rest of the country is the dominant role of evangelicals—Baptists above all."¹⁵⁷ With more than 16 million members, the Southern Baptist Convention is today the largest Protestant religious body in the United States, and among all Christian denominations, it comes in second only to The Catholic Church.¹⁵⁸ The organization owes its founding to sectional conflict between Northern and Southern Baptists during the antebellum period, particularly a dispute over whether slave owners ought to be disqualified from serving as missionaries in the Triennial Convention, the nation's first national Baptist denomination. At a regional convention held in Augusta, Georgia in 1845, Baptists from all across the South came together to officially break ties with their Northern affiliates and formally created the Southern Baptist Convention. According to Wilson, Baptists became "the largest and most dynamic southern denomination, an unofficial established church

¹⁵⁷ Wilson, "Preachin', Prayin', and Singin' on the Public Square," 11.

¹⁵⁸ National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 2012*.

of the region and defender of the status quo,” especially in the late 1800s and early 1900s when the group functioned as “the institutional expression of the South’s plain folk, developing within the context of a self-conscious regional defensiveness and cultural separatism from the nation.”¹⁵⁹ In recent years the denomination’s relative share of the United States population has begun to decline,¹⁶⁰ and demographic changes in Rockdale have contributed to more significant growth among the community’s historically black congregations as well as the establishment of numerous nondenominational church plants. First Baptist Church has indeed struggled to attract new members at the same rate as neighboring majority-black mega-churches, but even still, its history as one of the county’s most prominent and influential congregations and its affiliation with what historian Paul Harvey calls “the denomination that dominates the South”¹⁶¹ mean that sermons from the church’s pulpit carry a certain clout. Taking into account this historical power and authority of churches like First Baptist in communities across the entire region, Pastor Marshal’s sermon should be interpreted not only as promoting a religious message but as representing a regional perspective as well.

Growing the Church

Members from First Baptist Church certainly seemed to take messages like Pastor Marshal’s to heart, and along with other churchgoers in the community, they leveraged the practice of hospitality for the purpose of ultimately bringing people to Christ—or at least to church. Indeed, I found that Rockdale’s churchgoers actually tended to assume that the people they encountered on a daily basis were already Christians as well, and by extending invitations to attend a Sunday morning worship service, they seemed less intent on converting nonbelievers than on simply growing the size of their churches. For example, many churchgoers in the

¹⁵⁹ Wilson, “Preachin’, Prayin’, and Singin’ on the Public Square,” 14.

¹⁶⁰ Pew Research Center, *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*.

¹⁶¹ Harvey, “At Ease in Zion, Uneasy in Babylon,” 64.

community shared similar stories of how they first got involved at the congregations where they subsequently became dedicated members. One woman explained that a next-door neighbor had invited her to church several times, and another remembered accepting an invitation from the mother of her daughter's classmate one afternoon during carpool. One more recalled that a coworker had earnestly asked her to multiple church events over the course of several months.

In a pattern that appears to replicate itself, people who appreciated having been welcomed into church life took up the task of inviting others. Regina Lewis, a middle-aged black woman who moved to Rockdale from New York City several years ago, spoke to this point quite vividly. Over lunch one day I asked her to recount her experiences adjusting to daily life in Conyers, "Did you have lots of people ask you if you're a Christian or invite you to their church, things like that?" She casted a side-eye glance my way as if my question had been a ridiculous one. "People always invite you to church in Georgia. What, are you new here?" We both laughed heartily, and I admitted that I had assumed her answer would be yes. "It's a *law*," she continued, "as soon as they find out you just moved here, they need to invite you to their church." She explained that even though she had long-identified as a Christian, she had only ever occasionally attended church services in New York. After moving to Rockdale though, she quickly learned that regular church attendance was the norm and got actively involved at a local congregation. Once acclimated to the church culture in her new community, she took up the task of using hospitality to attract prospective church members herself and made it a habit to invite friends, neighbors, and coworkers to come along with her. Moreover, she made strategic use of meals to develop relationships with her guests in the same taken-for-granted way that many native Southerners described. "So, whenever I invite somebody to church, I always take them to dinner afterwards," Regina explained. I chuckled and said, "That's part of the deal, isn't it?" "Mmm-hmm," she agreed, "I don't tell them. But it's part of the deal."

Like Regina, many of Rockdale's newcomers described having received invitations to church not long after having arrived. One woman reported moving with her family into a new home and immediately receiving an invitation to visit a neighbor's church. "The very day we

moved in, they came by to invite us to their church,” she explained. Her husband described the interaction with more detail:

When we pulled up with a moving U-Haul trailer, I had just put the brake on and was coming out when across the street comes a woman with two of her kids who welcomed us as their neighbor and wanted to know where we went to church. We told them that we didn't have a church. She says, “Well, we go to church down the street. We'd love to have you.”

Their story rang a bell because it sounded strikingly similar to what had happened to Andrew and me when, after having lived in a rental home for a year, we purchased our own house and made plans to spend the 4th of July holiday weekend moving our belongings. We pulled into the driveway with a large rental truck full of boxes and set to work in the brutal heat and humidity. Just an hour or two later, I was trekking down my front steps toward the truck when I noticed something out of the corner of my eye—a man and woman, both older and white, standing together in the yard just a few feet away. I was a little startled and sincerely confused at first, but the couple quickly introduced themselves as our new neighbors from a few doors down. “I don't know if you have any plans for tomorrow afternoon,” said the woman, “but our church is having a special patriotic concert and we'd love for you to come and be our special guests.” I politely explained that we would be very busy unpacking, but she persisted. “It's only an hour or two long. It would be a nice break for you actually.” Given the enormity of the task ahead of us and the realities of limited time and energy, I wondered to myself how anyone in our position could be expected to go visit a church even if only for an hour. “That's sweet of you, but I don't think we'll be able to get away,” I explained. “Maybe another time?” The woman suddenly produced a small piece of scratch paper with her phone number written on it and said, “Well if you change your mind feel free to call us so that we know you're coming.” Her husband chimed in, “And sometime soon once you're settled we'll have to have you over for dinner so we can get to know you better.”

The couple subsequently invited us to several other events at their church including an Easter Cantata we attended the following spring. While we happily accepted the invitation and enjoyed the performance, the persistence with which the couple had asked us to attend various

events sometimes bordered on annoying—in part because we often simply weren't interested in the scheduled events but also because I felt it was presumptuous of them to assume that we would be interested. It was easy for me to imagine that people uninterested in church activities might become frustrated with neighbors who seemed to take for granted that going to church is something so many locals do with regularity. Most of the unchurched people I spoke with described feeling only slightly bothered and often explained that they accepted frequent invitations to church as a fact of life in Rockdale. One young man for example explained that most people's invitations did not trouble him:

Yeah, there are a lot of church people around here and what not. Most people are—well, they invite you, they're like, "You should come to church," but they're not too pushy about it. I've had some people who were pushy, but it wasn't too pushy. One of my old roommate's mom was just always telling me to come to church and what not. It's a little annoying, but you get used to it.

I empathized with him because even though I was personally accustomed to the type of religious culture I experienced in Rockdale, I sometimes did find myself feeling the fatigue of politely putting off unwanted invitations.

One particularly memorable case involved Haven Fellowship Church, a medium-sized, mostly-white, interdenominational congregation. By the time Andrew and I accepted an invitation to attend a Sunday morning worship service there, we had already become members of Trinity Baptist Church and therefore introduced ourselves to Haven's greeters as members of another congregation who were simply visiting for the week. I had intended for those details to signal that we were in no way potential recruits, but Haven's members nonetheless dutifully set about conveying how welcome we would be to come back again and get regularly involved in the church.

After the service had concluded, Andrew and I stood in the back of the sanctuary as we were introduced to several congregants who gathered around with bright and hopeful smiles. One woman close to us in age described two different Sunday school classes she thought we should consider visiting:

We have one for college-age people, but honestly a lot of them are a few years out of college so there are a lot of people your age in there. The other one is for young adults, but most of them are people who are married with children already—busy raising kids, you know. So even though a lot of them are your age you might not feel like you have a lot in common with them since you haven't started a family yet. Actually it might be a good idea for you try them both out and just see where you fit in the best.

I mentioned to her again that we had been regularly attending a Sunday school class at the church where we were members, and she quickly responded, "Oh I know, I'm just saying, if you want to come check us out. I think you would really like it here!" Another woman, this one older, introduced herself and shook my hand before asking, "So, are you an alto or a soprano? Because we would just love to have y'all in the choir!" She laughed warmly as if to acknowledge that she was half-joking, but then continued, "We actually just got our music books delivered for the Christmas program, and we start rehearsals this week so it would be the perfect time to get involved. We meet Wednesday nights at 7:30 pm." Realizing that she was perhaps only one-quarter-joking, I made some self-deprecating remark about my inability to carry a tune and changed the topic of conversation. Someone else interjected and took my attention away for a few moments, but then suddenly I felt a gentle tug on my sleeve from behind. I turned around to find that the woman had more information to share about joining the choir. "I just wanted to say that actually we don't start rehearsals for the Christmas program until *next week*. I would hate for y'all to show up this Wednesday because there won't be anybody here!" I thanked her for the clarification, reiterated that I'm not much of a singer, and wondered to myself whether she actually thought there was any chance I would ever show up for choir practice.

A few months later, Andrew and I were with a family from Trinity getting ice cream at the local Dairy Queen when our friends noticed and waved over a woman they knew. After some casual small-talk, our friends explained that they knew her from Haven Fellowship where their children had previously attended a summer vacation Bible school program. "Oh," I said, "we actually visited your church a while ago with a friend." The woman's eyes lit up as she said, "Oh how did you like it? I don't remember meeting you so maybe I wasn't there that week." I told her we had enjoyed our visit and also explained that we knew our present company, who by that time

were in line to order their Oreo Blizzards, from having been involved at Trinity. “Oh so y’all go to church together—I see,” said the woman. “Well we’d love to have you again sometime at Haven,” she continued. “We really are such a warm and inviting church, and I just know that you and your husband would feel welcome.” I tried to kindly let her know that we probably wouldn’t be coming back and explained, “We have a pretty busy schedule over the next few weeks.” “Oh I understand,” she said, “I’ll be looking for you though and hoping to see you very soon!”

While our encounter with the people of Haven Fellowship Church represents somewhat of an exaggerated case compared to the many other churches I interfaced with in Rockdale, it effectively illustrates the devotion with which Rockdale’s churchgoers earnestly and eagerly used the practice of hospitality to embody their religious beliefs throughout the course of their daily lives. The regularity with which church members from a variety of congregations tended to casually insert invitations into routine conversations and chance meetings was a key practice through which the discourse of hospitality became manifested as lived religion in the community. Moreover, the apparent disregard for whether their invitees were even interested in visiting a church suggested that the practice of extending warm welcomes was not always a strategic attempt to effectively recruit new members but sometimes a simple, taken-for-granted ritual, an automatic instinct or inner compulsion that churchgoers acted on without thinking too carefully.

This was certainly the impression I got back at Trinity when Andrew and I were repeatedly questioned about why we rarely brought guests with us to church. Generally speaking, we have never felt comfortable inviting friends or acquaintances to church events unless we happen to know that they are interested in a specific activity or ministry we can connect them to, and our unwillingness to participate in the otherwise commonplace practice of inviting anyone and everyone to worship sometimes became a cause for concern at Trinity. For example, one Sunday I mentioned to a woman at church that we would be absent the following week due to some of my relatives coming from out of town to visit us for the weekend. “Oh you should bring them to Trinity!” she replied. I politely explained that we had already planned to spend our time together doing other things instead, but the woman persisted, “Well we would love to have them. You should ask them anyway.” (I didn’t.) On another Sunday, an older man we

had gotten to know quite well asked if we were interested in getting lunch with him after the service, but I explained that we already had plans to meet up with a couple of our college friends for brunch. “Oh okay, well have a good time with your friends,” he replied. After a brief pause, he added, “Hey, how come we’ve never met your friends? Why don’t you invite them to church one week?” “Oh I don’t think they’d be interested—they’re not church people,” I explained. The man looked dumbfounded. “Well how do you know they’re not interested if you’ve never invited them? You should see if they want to come worship with us.” Suddenly I felt defensive and replied curtly, “Well one of them is Jewish and the other is Catholic. Neither of them is particularly observant. I’m not going to ask them to sit through a Baptist church service for obvious reasons.” The man responded by widening his eyes and admitting, “Oh okay, I guess that makes sense.” That Andrew and I sensed people viewing us as something like delinquents ultimately served as an indication that inviting others to church was one of the most ubiquitous and taken-for-granted practices permeating the lived experience of churchgoing Christians in Rockdale.

Ministering to the Needy

Beyond evangelizing the unbelieving and recruiting the unchurched, many other facets of lived religion in Rockdale incorporated references to warm welcomes and generous hosts as well. As Christian congregations ministered to those in need for example, they relied on the same elective affinity between Southern hospitality and Christian hospitality to convey a message of compassion and benevolence. For example, members of Heritage Hills Baptist Church provided comfort to families at the local hospital’s waiting room area by providing them with “hospitality baskets,”¹⁶² and on one Saturday evening per month, members of Living Waters Seventh-Day Adventist Church shared “the love of Jesus through Christian Hospitality” by distributing free food and other items.¹⁶³ Instances like these demonstrate once again how the legendary culture of

¹⁶² Heritage Hills Baptist Church, “Community ‘GO’ Projects.”

¹⁶³ Living Waters Seventh-Day Adventist Church, “From the Blog.”

Southern hospitality can be observed in people's embodied behaviors when we take into account experiences of lived religion in the local community.

One important religious practice which used hospitality to reach those in need involved providing unhoused community members with accommodation in church buildings themselves. The nonprofit organization Family Promise of NewRock, a local affiliate of the national Family Promise organization, coordinated the partnership of 20 different area congregations as they sought to provide "transitional housing, hospitality and case management for families with children experiencing homelessness in Rockdale and Newton counties."¹⁶⁴ Each week, a different congregation took on the role of host by providing meals and lodging to families enrolled in the program. Over the course of about a year, Andrew and I stayed after the Sunday worship service of each host week at Trinity to help the congregation unload the Family Promise truck and set up the accommodations. Folding rollaway beds were hauled up the elevator to a wing of Sunday school classrooms which we transformed into makeshift bedrooms, and large plastic tubs containing each family's personal belongings were placed in their assigned rooms. Each night during a host week, one or two congregants from Trinity volunteered to spend the night at church along with the guest families, and duties included serving a family style dinner, helping children with homework, and simply visiting with parents.

The first time Andrew and I volunteered to spend the night, a staff member at Trinity instructed us to "try and make the guest families feel at home by making the atmosphere warm and relaxed and inviting." That evening we shared a supper of pizza and tossed salad with three families before running outside with the children to the church's playground. Later, I sat on the floor of the fellowship hall while two young girls giggled and tied my hair into silly-looking updos while Andrew chatted and laughed with several of the parents. After the children were put to bed, Andrew and I stayed up late watching the season finale of the hit reality TV show *The Voice* with two mothers who were eager to learn the outcome of the popular singing competition. The

¹⁶⁴ Family Promise of NewRock, "Family Promise of NewRock."

women and I talked extensively about current celebrity gossip, making occasional use of our smartphones to look up details about Hollywood stars, and our interactions felt strangely similar to how people might enjoy one another's company in the comfort of their own living rooms. That we were actually sitting in a church building was easy to forget as the ladies spoke about setting their alarms to wake up early the next morning and remembering to sign fieldtrip permission slips for their children to return to school. By using church facilities to provide unhoused families with food and shelter, members of Trinity Baptist Church as well as Family Promise's other partnering congregations employed hospitality rituals as a means of ministering to those in need, and in doing so they embodied the discourse of Southern hospitality through religious practices in their own community. For the ethos of gracious hosts and warm welcomes to be manifested as lived religion through practices like these raised important questions about the role of Christianity in determining who did and did not feel welcome in Rockdale, and in the following chapters I'll explore processes by which hospitality rituals were used to include some types of people while excluding others.

CHAPTER 3

COME TOGETHER: HOSPITALITY AND RACIAL RECONCILIATION

I had barely made it up onto the porch when Tyler Cooper swung his front door open to greet me. “Hey, Miss Betsie! How’s it going? Come on inside. We’ve been looking forward to seeing you again!” I had met Tyler and his wife Larissa just a few days earlier during a visit to their church with a mutual acquaintance, and the couple had invited me over that evening so they could participate in an interview for my research project. Larissa welcomed me into her home with a gentle hug and a couple minutes of small talk before directing me to a plush leather sofa in her family’s well-appointed living room. The couple’s teenage children Anthony and Makayla appeared to have been relaxing after a long day at school but quickly perked up as their parents began to describe daily life in Rockdale.

A black family from Mississippi, the Coopers had relocated about fifteen years earlier and subsequently observed the community’s recent waves of population growth along with the rise of a politically powerful black majority. In describing their own image of Rockdale however, they emphasized its moral identity as a Southern community where residents value faith and family above all else. “You just find a lot of families here on Sundays going to church,” Tyler explained, “and people have a lot of belief in God, in the Bible, in this area.” I asked whether it had been a priority for them to live among people who share their Christian faith, and Tyler explained that even if their neighbors do not strictly subscribe to all the same Christian beliefs and practices, people in the Bible Belt nonetheless share a similar set of customs and standards derived from a Christian worldview more generally. “You see, people here are more courteous. Even the people that don’t share your specific faith, people still—if they have some belief in God, some belief in the Bible—they tend to take some things from it even if we all don’t share the same things exactly.” Larissa nodded in agreement saying, “You raise your kids, regardless of which specific tradition, with morals and principles.” “Yeah,” Tyler reiterated, “people here generally have at least some type of morals in common.”

For the community’s character to be so heavily imbued with Christian religious culture had been especially conducive for the Coopers who tended to organize their lives around church.

In fact, Tyler and Larissa required all other family commitments to accommodate their congregation's regularly-scheduled events, and as Makayla explained, "Everything is based around that, like any decisions. We can't even go out of state or out of town without being sure we don't miss a meeting or anything." Larissa likewise requested time off from work each year in order to attend week-long church retreats, and both children were prohibited from participating in extracurricular activities which might pose scheduling conflicts with the church's event calendar. When asked if church had always been this important to them, Tyler explained that as a young man he had neglected his spiritual life and suffered for it greatly. His conviction was renewed however after attending a church service and meeting someone special—his future wife, Larissa.

Tyler went on to describe the various church activities which consumed his family's time, including for example a "hospitality network" in which family groups volunteered to provide meals for guest speakers. "Yesterday it was our group's turn, so we went over to one of our friend's house. We had a little meal and we just all enjoyed eating and fellowshiping together." On the topic of eating and fellowshiping, Larissa added that she and Tyler had always insisted on eating dinner together as a family each night. "When I became pregnant we said that's what we were going to do as a family," she explained. "It's a funny thing because I nursed both my kids. And with the younger one, Makayla, I used to make her wait until we got all together at the table." Visibly embarrassed by the story, Makayla chuckled nervously as her mother continued, "And so we would eat, have our dinner plates, and then I would nurse her at the table so we would all still be eating together as a family." Drowning out her daughter's pleas to stop with the humiliating story, Larissa added, "It's about priorities, and our kids know that what is important to us is our faith and our family."

"Speaking of dinner," Tyler said, "would you like to join us tonight? There's always room for one more!" There had been no previous mention of my eating dinner with the family so I was concerned about the possibility of imposing on them. I stumbled over my words trying to ascertain the sincerity of the invitation, but Larissa quickly saved face for me. "Another reason we always have dinner together as a family is we always want to be able to share with others," she said. "Our kids know that we always have dinner at the same place, at the same time, and

they know they can invite a friend from church or from school and that they will have a seat at our table.” She went on to describe cooking several large meals each weekend and then storing them in the refrigerator to be reheated throughout the week. “I’m just too tired to cook when I get home from work, but this way it’s all done ahead of time and there is no excuse not to have a healthy meal together.” Assured that my company would cause no undue inconvenience for the family, I agreed to join them for a delicious dinner of herb-roasted pork tenderloin, seasoned beans and rice, creamy corn pudding, peach-infused iced tea, and for dessert, made-from-scratch sour cream pound cake.

Listening to Tyler and Larissa describe their family’s values—their appreciation for the South’s Bible Belt culture, the frequency and regularity with which they attend church, their understanding of hospitality as a religious practice, the way in which they make family dinner time a priority and invite others to join in—I was struck by how the routines and rituals of their daily lives evoked a sense of belonging in Rockdale despite circumstances which could have prevented them from feeling at home. They were after all non-natives who had relocated to the community without even knowing a single soul there, and as part of a larger trend in which families like theirs had helped to make Rockdale into a black-majority community, one might reasonably expect the Coopers to have been met with animosity and resentment from white oldtimers.

I asked the Coopers about their experiences with white neighbors, and while they did report having encountered overt racism from time to time, they framed such antagonisms as exceptions to the norm of biracial camaraderie in Rockdale. “Oh we’ve been call the N-word sometimes, but it didn’t really bother me because those people are just crazy,” Tyler explained. “Some people are just going to be that way, but most people aren’t like that.” I asked if their impression of local race relations had evolved along with changes in the community’s demographic makeup, but Tyler argued that the exact proportions of black and white families had mattered less than the fact that both groups seemed to feel comfortable around each other:

I was raised that way. We had some white neighbors and some black neighbors, so it was so diverse and mixed that I was used to that. I was raised that way. I saw my father, when he would go help one of our neighbors, it didn’t matter what color they

were, black or white. That's how I was raised. It doesn't matter. So it doesn't bother me, because I've been to bars here where everyone was all white. It didn't bother me. I just sat there. Nobody messed with me.

He went on to provide an example of the type of interaction he believed to be characteristic of race relations in Rockdale:

Most of the jobs that I've worked on, I've been the only black person on the team. And guess what? They used to sometimes come when we would have a meeting, a team meeting, and say, "Oh Tyler, do you feel out of place? You feel comfortable?" I would say, "No, I don't feel uncomfortable. I'm good." It's just how I was raised. I've always gotten along with everybody, black or white.

Echoing her husband's sentiment, Larissa said, "Me and my department where I work—there's a standing joke because I'm the only black person who works in the department. But we all laugh about it because we all get along and it's no problem. I've never felt like I don't belong."

In this chapter I'll explore the politics of hospitality by explaining how people like the Coopers came to enjoy the greatest sense of belonging in Rockdale. First I'll argue that whether black or white, Christian families tended to share a common set of assumptions about moral decency and political correctness which were fundamentally informed by the hegemony of Christian beliefs and practices. Then I'll describe how this group negotiated black-white race relations by acknowledging the South's long history of race-based discrimination and using the practice of hospitality to create biracial networks of reciprocity amongst themselves. My argument will show how black and white Christians symbolized their unified religious commitment to achieving racial reconciliation by drawing on the elective affinity between Southern hospitality and Christian hospitality and extending warm welcomes to one another.

Politics as Usual: Moral Boundaries and the Hegemony of Christianity

Lived Religion in Private Life

Christian beliefs and practices were a regular fixture of daily life in Rockdale, and among many families in the community, active participation in church activity was key to maintaining a

sense of respectability and credibility among one's neighbors. While differences like those between oldtimers and newcomers or Southerners and Yankees sometimes served as important points of distinction, it was religious affiliation which constituted the most basic moral boundary in Rockdale. More specifically, Christianity functioned as the widely agreed upon social boundary separating honorable, decent individuals from their morally suspect counterparts, and regular church attendance functioned as the associated symbolic boundary through which community members identified themselves and others as "good Christians."¹⁶⁵ Throughout the course of their private lives then, families in Rockdale negotiated these boundaries as they sought to fit in, make friends, and achieve some sense of belonging in their community.

This was especially evident in the emphasis many parents, both black and white, placed on regular church attendance as they sought not only to nurture their children's spiritual well-being but also to ensure that they developed a sufficient appreciation for tradition, discipline, and authority. When I asked one middle-aged white woman whether she had any household rules for her teenage children for example, she explained that she and her husband required just two things of them. "First of all, if you live in our house you go to church on Sunday. And two, you will not talk back to us, you will be respectful. That's it." When I asked a middle-aged black man the same question, he elaborated on several other themes like race-relations, alcohol, and media and entertainment, but nonetheless similarly stressed the importance of regular church attendance for instilling good values in his children. "We are really conservative; we're conservative because we're old-school parents," he explained. "We're very involved with the kids when it comes to school, what they watch on TV and what they listen to on the radio." I asked what kinds of entertainment he deemed inappropriate, and he answered, "Any rap music, especially rap music that's degrading women, rap music that's degrading any race, or rap music that curses in it. My kids have been raised up on gospel music. They're raised with the church."

¹⁶⁵ See Lamont and Molnár's "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences" for more on symbolic and social boundaries.

He went on to explain how Christian beliefs and practices inspired a variety of parenting strategies he and his wife employed:

If you're right, wrong, indifferent—you're going to church or you're out of our home. When you turn 18 years old, we're going to continue to encourage you to go to church if you're living in our home. But when you're out of our home, we have no control. So we're that old-school, conservative-style parent. We believe in our kids. We don't discuss race in our home. We don't allow people to discuss it. We don't allow people to curse in front of our kids. We don't like, if we can control it, people to drink in front of our kids. We don't drink, we don't smoke, and we don't curse. We don't talk about either one of our races, degrade any one of our races in front of our children. We don't allow them to do it. But we do make sure that they understand that these are all your friends and not to worry about who you hang around unless they are not baptized.

Like so many other parents similarly reported, church attendance was widely seen as fundamentally important to children's proper development, and many parents hoped that by requiring their children to participate in church life as youngsters, they would grow up to one day carry on the tradition in their own lives as adults.

Of course some children disappoint their parents, and many of Rockdale's older residents perceived that an increasing number of middle-aged and young adults had either neglected to make church a priority in their lives or else rejected it altogether on somewhat dubious moral grounds. For the parents of these younger generations, the apparently declining significance of church was seen as a cause for alarm. One older white man named Wyatt Howard for example explained that even though his adult son had never dropped his identity as a Christian, a period of time during which he did drop regular church attendance had caused his parents quite a bit of grief:

My son, he believes in God, he's a Christian, but he is anti-church. He's one of those that says there's a lot of wasted space and time for churches because they only use the building a couple times a week and there are so many other things that we could be doing with those facilities and stuff. I don't disagree with that totally. I agree with his image of how he does see that.

Whereas some parents insisted on their teenagers accompanying them to church, Wyatt said that even when his son was still living at home, he and his wife stopped short of making him go to church. "He would show up in church periodically for worship, but when we went to Sunday

school he didn't go to church with us. We never forced him to go to church with us." For their son to be a self-proclaimed Christian was not enough however, and Wyatt and his wife could not be satisfied until their adult son and his entire household complied with the expectation that they all regularly attend church together as a family:

Over the years we have continually prayed for him to be involved in the church. Well, he got married, he had two boys. We would go pick up their boys and bring them to Sunday school. His wife joined our church, but she wasn't active in the church. She wasn't there every Sunday, and he would only come on special events but that would be it.

According to Wyatt, all those prayers eventually payed off, because years later their son was invited to attend a special event at a local congregation and enjoyed his time there so much that he decided to go back. "He went to church, heard the pastor preach, and enjoyed it! He has since gotten baptized and joined the church. He's a churchaholic now!"

Others in Rockdale continued to be skeptical of local churches, including the same ones they were required to attend as children, but even the community's unchurched population did not dispute the fact that regular and active involvement in a local congregation—i.e. being a "churchaholic"—symbolized the community's standard of moral decency. As one young man explained, "The thing is, being in the South, I can get away without going to church. But I can't get away without feeling guilty about not going to church." I asked for an example of a situation that left him feeling guilty, and he recalled a recent experience getting lunch with friends at a local restaurant. "It was Sunday, and so of course there were all the church people in there getting lunch. Me and my buddies was just wearing t-shirts and flip-flops, and you could tell all these people in dresses and suits was just looking at us. Looking at us like, 'You know you need to be in church.'" He shrugged in apparent frustration before adding, "I know. I know I need to be in church. I don't need nobody to remind me though." Transplants from faraway places similarly represented a cause for concern because they did not always adopt the Southern tradition of making church a priority. One oldtimer for example suggested that the community could better cope with its changing population if more newcomers were to assimilate to Rockdale's local

religious culture. “I think the county has changed a bit for the worse,” he said, “but I still believe if we had more people that were active church members, Christians, that things would be better.”

Transplants who did join churches after moving to Rockdale tended to credit their congregations with having helped them to settle in and get acclimated. One black woman described having felt overwhelmed and disconnected when she first moved to the community with her husband and two young children. “We were used to having my mom and my sister and people like that living right around the corner back in Ohio, so when we got down here it was like, ‘Who do we call when we have a question or need some help or something?’” For the first few months, she and her husband struggled with their strange, new surroundings, but things suddenly improved after the family started attending a local nondenominational church. “We didn’t have any family here, but it was like our church was going to be our family,” she said. She went on to recall how members of the church had helped them to feel more at ease:

They would just help us figure things out, you know. Like telling me which daycare would be a good option for the baby and recommending a mechanic when our car was having issues. And it was like we knew we had people, we had *our people* here, so we didn’t have to worry about things like what would we do for the Super Bowl or for the 4th of July. We knew that friends from church would include us in something they were doing and that we wouldn’t be bored or left out. And we knew that if we ever had an emergency, had a favor we needed to ask, that we could just call somebody from church and they would be there for us.

A white woman who had moved to the area from Pennsylvania similarly credited her church with providing a sense of community and belonging. “I would say that 95 percent of our friends around here are from church, and when we first moved here we didn’t know anyone at all,” she explained. “I don’t really know how you would meet people here if you didn’t go to church somewhere. I think you would just feel like you didn’t really have any friends, didn’t really have a place you know?” By affiliating themselves with local congregations, black and white transplants like these were able to identify themselves as decent and principled people worthy of being included in Rockdale’s established networks of “good” Christian families.

While an eagerness to participate in church life certainly helped transplants to feel that they were actively involved in their community, a familiarity with the ins and outs of church

hospitality rituals specific to Rockdale, or to the South more generally, was equally essential. This point is well-illustrated by Christian transplants who, despite being well-versed in the culture of church life elsewhere, found that adjustments had to be made in order to abide by the community's traditionally Southern norms. For example, several newcomers originating from outside the South reported that one key difference was the common practice of teetotalism among Rockdale's church-going Christians. One such woman, a self-described devout Conservative Protestant originally from New Jersey, recalled her surprise at learning that Southerners do not typically include alcohol in church hospitality rituals:

Every social occasion—for our parents and then as we grew up and as we were teenagers in college—every social occasion included alcohol. The idea of going to these parties and no one having alcohol was a huge shock to us. Like, alcohol plus party equals fun—you know what I'm saying? That was a huge shift for us, the fact that we could go somewhere for a party and not have alcohol there.

Her family joined a local Baptist church and over time came to realize that while some members did drink alcohol outside of church-sponsored events, others were vehemently opposed to the idea altogether. "So most people are okay with knowing that we drink ... but I did find out that there are definitely some people in the church still who would think very badly about me if they knew that I drink." She went on to explain how she typically abstained from alcohol when in the company of teetotaler church friends because she wasn't sure whether they would respect her difference of opinion on the topic. "We actually have some in our Sunday school class who are very, very anti-alcohol. Certainly if we ever have a church function here at the house then we don't have alcohol." "So as far as a big cultural shift," she concluded, "I would say that alcohol and the importance of church were the two biggest changes when we came here." The care with which families like these honored local norms surrounding the practice of church hospitality indicated just how crucial active church membership could be to making new friends and fitting in among Rockdale's Christian establishment.

Lived Religion in Public Life

Families successfully navigated moral boundaries in Rockdale by incorporating lived religion into private matters like raising children and making friends, but the hegemony of Christian beliefs and practices was apparent in the public life of the community as well. Generally speaking, Rockdale's black and white Christians supported the incorporation of faith-based discourse and practice into a wide variety of public concerns, from local elections, governance, and law enforcement to healthcare, education, and business. Moreover, some suggested that their community's credibility as a hospitable place depended on its leaders promoting Christian traditions among the general public. For example, when I asked one man to expand on why he perceived Rockdale to be in decline, he said, "Well, I used to think of the South as being polite and folks with good manners—'yes ma'am, no ma'am.' I think there's still some of that out there, but not as much anymore." He paused for a moment before concluding, "Why have things got to what they are? I still think that taking prayer out of school was a big factor. I really believe that."

The fundamental importance of Christian belief and practice to the culture of public life in Rockdale was especially evident among the community's locally-elected officials, and Sheriff Eric Levett, a black, middle-aged man born and raised in Rockdale, in many ways epitomized the community's religious character. When I sat down to interview the Sheriff, one of the first things I asked was for him to tell me the story of how he got elected. "It was a bittersweet experience, and when I tell you bittersweet, every time I talk about it, it waters my eyes," he said. He took a deep breath, indicating that the story he was about to tell would be a long one, and then began to explain how it had been God's plan for him to become sheriff:

Right before I announced my campaign, my wife was offered a job. She was a housewife. She was offered a job at an ophthalmologist here in Conyers. She didn't start right away because she had a physical. She didn't want to take off work. She said, "Can I do my physical before I start?" They said, "Sure." So she went for her physical and she was given a start date the next following week. During that physical, I announced my campaign. But after she had taken the last test, which was a mammogram, they told her she had breast cancer.

I said, "Lord, the Devil is attacking me because I'm running for this office." My wife and I prayed about this, about the decision to run for office and when is the right time

and when should I run, for over a year. The Lord spoke to me, and that's what made me run for sheriff of this town. Well, when you have faith and you believe, you don't let anything discourage you or conquer your faith ... I continued to believe that the Lord will take care of me no matter what happened to me. So I felt that the Devil was trying to attack us to discourage my faith and take me out of this race before I really got in it.

So we didn't tell anybody until all the tests were in. We finally told the family. I told my wife, "I'll just wait because your health is more important than this race." She said, "No, you're not. You said that you had faith and you believe." I said, "Yeah." She said, "Well, you're going to stay in this race no matter what happens because I have faith and believe that I'm going to beat this cancer. We're going to beat this race and this cancer together."

Just as I started to say something in response to the remarkable story, I realized that it wasn't over yet. He went on to explain how just days before the election, after months of campaigning for office and caring for his wife, his grandmother became severely ill and had to be hospitalized. She had hoped to live long enough to see him win but sadly passed away before the results of the election could be announced.

According to the Sheriff, this tragic turn of events served only to reinforce his religious convictions. "I said, 'Oh my God, the Devil, you're not going to conquer my faith.' I just began to pray, and I began to just rebuke the Devil. We had no recourse but to continue on and just continue to live and believe that God is still in me." The race was a close one, and on the day of his grandmother's funeral, election officials tallied military and absentee ballots which together with regular ballots showed that Levett had won by a mere 34 votes. A recount was conducted over the course of the following week which resulted in a revised tally of 33 votes. "Still declared a victory and also declared my escape of the Devil, everything that the Devil took us through, from my wife to my grandmother," he explained. "My wife was going through chemo and radiation, and she beat the cancer. She is today cancer-free." As I searched for an appropriate response to the truly extraordinary tale, I couldn't help but marvel at how his story seemed to function as a Christian testimony just as well as a chronicle of political events.

Importantly, Sheriff Levett seemed to be a beloved government official, widely respected by both blacks and whites, Republicans and Democrats. Many of the people I interviewed made it a point to praise him as a "good leader," "family man," "local guy," or "good Christian," and if

anyone did harbor ill feelings toward the Sheriff, they were at least unwilling to share those concerns with me. More specifically, residents often complimented the Sheriff for seeming to value the role of Christian beliefs and practices in public life, and when I asked him about the relationship between religion and police work, he indeed suggested that Christians could help curb crime if they were to put more effort into evangelism:

I think that we as Christians are failing—we're failing our own faith and our belief, and that's because you have to witness a religion, going out and witnessing and trying to recruit. Well, I believe somewhere in our Bible it says that that's what we're supposed to do, and that's been something that bothered me for years when I learned that. I will tell you this—I believe that we are failing our people because that's why crime is like it is. We, as supposed-to-be-Christians, including myself, should be out witnessing to these young adults and these individuals that are committing crimes. That's what we should be doing.

After referencing recent news headlines about declines in religiosity across the country, the Sheriff concluded by saying, “So I do think we are letting our community down. We're letting our religion down.”

The ease with which Sheriff Levett incorporated Christianity into his public role as an elected official was mirrored by many others involved in local politics as well, and government functions in the county very often included copious symbolic references to Christian religious traditions. The 2016 ceremonial installation of recently elected and re-elected county government officials for example reportedly featured a Christian invocation, scripture reading, and benediction as well as multiple gospel musicians who had the audience “on their feet and praising God.”¹⁶⁶ Each of the ten politicians who swore oaths of office during the ceremony did so on personal family Bibles they had brought from home.¹⁶⁷ Generally speaking then, the very public nature of Christian belief and practice in Rockdale was for the most part encouraged, respected, and celebrated. In fact many residents explained that public servants who relied on their Christian

¹⁶⁶ The Rockdale Citizen, “Formality and Gospel Mix in Rockdale County Installation Ceremony.”

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

faith to guide them were especially trustworthy, and several said they would not even consider voting for someone who did not publically identify him or herself as a Christian. For example, when I asked one middle-aged woman whether she would ever vote for a non-Christian candidate, she replied, "I don't know that I would. I really don't know that I would." After pausing a moment to think about her answer to a question she had apparently never considered before, she concluded, "I really would prefer to have a Christian person. I would prefer Christians. I really would."

This widespread view that government leaders ought to publically embody and promote Christianity was something Rockdale's politicians took very seriously as they worked to build rapport with their constituents. Ruth Wilson for example, a black woman elected to serve as the county's Clerk of Courts, spoke at length about the importance of church for black voters and politicians in particular:

Traditionally, black politicians have relied upon the faith community as a way to be able to reach masses of people. Even though the pastors don't endorse, they invite people sitting in office into their churches. They allow them to say a word, introduce them, have the congregation pray over that person. Being present in those big black churches makes a difference in the thinking of many voters. "I know you. You came to my church. I remember when you and the pastor spoke, and we prayed for you." That matters to a lot of people as much as knocking on their door and asking for their vote. So the role of black churches in politics is significant. Black leadership is not going to ignore or abandon the black churches, even if they're not doing much to address the real needs and issues in the community.

In other words, black politicians relied on the hospitality of black churches in order to impress large numbers of potential voters. Ruth seemed to contradict herself however when she went on to say, "I have intentionally not allowed anyone to make an issue of my religious convictions." Intrigued, I asked how she had been able to avoid submitting to the popular litmus test of Christian religious identity, but her answer revealed that in fact she did make it a point to share her faith-based background while campaigning in the local community. "What I let people know is that my dad was the pastor of a small, country Baptist church for 33 years. My mother was the first lady of the church. That's where I learned my values," she explained. "What religion I practice is my business. All you need to know is that I'm a person of ethics and principles, and I

believe in following Christian principles. But beyond that, my religion is not up for discussion.”

Given the widespread understanding that church-going Christians are good people however, most voters in Rockdale would not have needed any information beyond that in order to conclude that she was indeed a reputable and trustworthy candidate.

Perhaps paradoxically, Ruth reported that even though black politicians often connected with their voters through black churches, she personally had chosen not to join any of Rockdale’s local congregations and instead maintained membership at a church in a neighboring community where she had formerly lived:

I need to have a relationship with all of these congregations, all of these churches. Once I align myself with one or the other, from my perspective that puts me in a box. I don’t want to be in that box. I want to be able to go to whatever church and follow whatever pastor I want on whatever Sunday I want. My home church is in DeKalb County, and I just never changed my membership. So that’s still my home church.

Her explanation reminded me of what Commissioner Oz Nesbitt, also a black Christian, had said about his own church-going habits. “As one of the commissioners in Rockdale County for the last eight years now, I’ve had the privilege and the pleasure of visiting *two* churches per Sunday. I’m serious—two churches per Sunday!” Ruth went on to say that the question of religion in politics typically left candidates feeling pressured to identify with one of the South’s three major Protestant traditions:

I grew up in the church. But still, you have to align yourself to one particular orthodoxy. Everybody’s expected to be, “I’m a Baptist,” or, “I’m a Presbyterian,” or, “I’m a Methodist.” “This is how we think. This is what we do. These are our values.” If you’re one of those others, then you’re just out. You’re an *other*. You’re not one of us.

In rattling off Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists as the three most acceptable religious traditions for politicians to hail from, Ruth made explicit reference to the lack of religious pluralism in Rockdale, and I decided to probe for more information on locals who fall outside of the boundaries of mainstream Protestantism. “Do you think that for someone who’s not from one of these Christian traditions that this would be a difficult community to live in?” “I do,” she replied, without skipping a beat, “because the churches are so prominent here. There’s churches

everywhere, and so many people who are part-time preachers. They have a fulltime job and then they preach on the side. It's amazing." I asked if she knew of anyone locally who identifies with a non-Christian religious tradition, and she replied, "Well, there's not a big Jewish presence. There are not many Jews in Rockdale, now that I think about it." She looked up and squinted her eyes as if searching her mind and said, "I'm trying to think if I even know somebody who acknowledges being Jewish. I don't know. Maybe they are and I just don't know it." As a follow-up, I asked whether she knew of any atheists in Rockdale. "I have to think about that," she said, returning to her posture of deep thought. "I'm trying to think if there's anybody that I know who has acknowledged that—I can't think of a single one."

Charles Reagan Wilson reminds us that "religion in the American South has been distinguished by the long cultural hegemony of the evangelical Protestants,"¹⁶⁸ and in Rockdale, this was made perfectly clear by examining the very limited degree to which people of other beliefs were taken into consideration for having a different point of view or even acknowledged for simply existing. The infusion of Christian beliefs and practices into multiple domains of public life meant that in spite of their differences, black and white Christians could similarly take for granted that their religious convictions would be accepted and even celebrated by the majority of their community. In other words, when it came to the politics of belonging, this group could expect to fit in among their neighbors with ease and ultimately come to feel quite at home in Rockdale.

We Belong Together: Hospitality Rituals and Black-White Racial Reconciliation

Shared Understandings

Just as black and white Christians similarly celebrated the hegemony of Christian beliefs and practices in Rockdale, they also tended to share a common understanding of how hospitality

¹⁶⁸ Wilson, "Preachin', Prayin', and Singin' on the Public Square," 9.

and religiosity contribute to the distinctiveness of Southern culture. For example, when asked what first comes to mind upon considering what it means to be Southern, many people from this group answered with references to gracious manners as well as Christian values. One older black man, a long-time resident of the community, said, "Religion pops to my mind quickly. Because it's deeper, deeper or fundamental, more real in the South. I think of graciousness. I think of politeness, willing to help, old Southern 'What can I do to help you, make you feel welcome and things like that.'" Likewise, when I asked a younger white woman who had relocated with her family to the area from New Jersey what it was she found attractive about Rockdale she replied, "Well just being in the South, you know. Church culture—we loved that. We loved the manners thing—we thought that was huge. And, you know, sweet tea." Another transplant, this one a black man from Texas, suggested that the South's friendliness and good manners could be directly attributed to its religious culture. "Wherever you go, there's that 'glad to see you' thing. But if you look at the community as part of the Southern Bible Belt, which is a very warm, loving thing regardless of which one of the churches you choose to attend, you see it's a very close-knit community because of that."

While black and white Christian transplants from other regions of the country seemed well-versed in explaining how religiosity and hospitality make the South unique, those who were native Southerners additionally tended to share a common understanding of the elective affinity between Southern hospitality and Christian hospitality. For example, many told similar childhood stories of having traditionally practiced hospitality with their families and friends on Sundays, The Lord's Day for Christians. Edith Jones, an older black woman originally from Alabama, fondly remembered looking forward to Sundays as a teenager because that was the only time her parents permitted boys to pay her visits. "I came from the generation of where Sunday nights was taking company or receiving company. That's when anybody that was interested in me was allowed to come over." She grinned mischievously and then chuckled as she recalled the role her father and brothers had played in the weekly ritual:

It would be after dinner and we would sit on the sofa and probably watch a television program together. My father drove a truck and needed to be out early the next morning, but before he went to bed, he would make sure that he knew who the person

was, introduce himself, and different things like that ... Of course you had different questions that was being asked ... And if they were from high school, both my brothers were in high school, and they would make sure that their presence was known. "That's my sister that's there." It's kind of that little, "Just let me let you know that I'm here, and I'll protect her, and we care about her."

Others, like one middle-aged black man who described impromptu invitations on Sundays as a regular fixture of his childhood, echoed the idea that Sunday is traditionally the most hospitable day of the week in the South:

I think that's the way people are raised in the South that they seem more hospitable. Because I can remember a time when I was growing up in Louisiana, seeing on Sundays or—more so on Sundays, but they had other days of the week—you could almost eat at anyone's house. They see you stopping by, you could be going to see somebody next door, like your friend, Joe, or whatever. And the neighbor next door would say, "Hey, we're having a crawfish boil. Ya'll come on over." They would almost make you come. "Ya'll come on over here."

A middle-aged white woman likewise explained that the tradition of visiting with friends and family on Sundays is what sets the South apart as an especially hospitable place. "I think people should feel like you are welcome anywhere. I think in a lot of places you are," she conceded. "But in the South I think it is more open for you to go to people's homes because that is what you've always done on Sundays," she contended, "people gathered at people's houses."

For entertaining guests to be especially common on Sundays might have been little more than a coincidence, but Edith went on to frame Sunday hospitality rituals in people's homes as a natural extension of the more formal religious practices which took place at church:

One of the things that I remember from my past is on Sunday afternoon after church and after we'd eaten, my father was going to have—since we were in the car, captured audience—we were going to go visit somebody that wasn't able to come to the church and he was going to sit there and provide whatever services that they might need. Since we were children our job was to go and do whatever little cleaning, my mom would do whatever little food, and then he would be ministering to them, since he was a deacon in the church.

In Edith's family then, the practice of visiting neighbors on Sundays was a normal part of her father's duties as a church deacon and reflected their regional identities as Southerners as well as their religious identities as Christians. But even for those who did not occupy official

leadership positions in local congregations, the moral duty to generously open one's home to guests on Sundays reportedly prevailed. One older white man for example remembered that Sunday was the one day of the week his mother felt compelled to graciously feed surprise visitors even if money and food were in short supply:

On Sunday everybody went to somebody else's house. Well that's the way I was raised. My mama was that way. You know, she was just amazing. She never ran out of food! And she would have—well, I wouldn't call them uninvited guests, but she just didn't know they were coming, you know.

He held up empty hands indicating that he had no logical explanation for how his mother was able to feed so many people and even seemed to suggest that her superhuman ability was akin to an act of God. Like the well-known Bible story in which Jesus uses five loaves of bread and two fish to miraculously feed a multitude of people, the man's mother always managed to feed her crowd in spite of her modest means. "Somehow or another she'd stretch it out. She'd go to the pantry I guess and get something else. Just amazing!" Having grown up in communities where hospitality rituals symbolized the Christian ethic of neighborliness just as well as the Southern tradition of generosity, black and white Christians like these were mutually familiar with how the culture of Southern hospitality becomes embodied through lived religion.

Atoning for the Past

These shared understandings about hospitality, religiosity, and Southern culture formed a basis on which Rockdale's black and white Christians negotiated the politics of black-white race relations in their community, and one key component of this endeavor was addressing the South's legacy of race-based discrimination. Rockdale's older residents often reflected on their younger years when excluding black neighbors was standard practice for white Southerners, and many emphasized the concept of hospitality in order to convey how black people had been made to feel unwelcome among white families and white churches. For example, one elderly white woman described her childhood on a local tenant farm where the land was owned by her wealthy grandfather but worked by a group of poor, black sharecroppers. As a child she sensed that the

black children she played with were “like family,” but looking back as an adult she came to understand that they had never been treated like equals. “My grandmother fed them all—if we all had a big country dinner for lunch, they all ate too,” she remembered. “But in those days the blacks would not come inside your house to eat. They ate on the back porch or wherever—from the same dishes we ate on—but they would not come in.” She described the arrangement as especially prejudicial given that she had always felt welcome to enter the homes of neighboring black tenant farmers. “I would go to my friend Sarah’s house and just go in there and get something to eat, a biscuit probably, like it was nothing.”

Other white residents similarly emphasized their own participation in racist practices, thereby admitting that they had treated their black neighbors with insufficient hospitality. Anne Murphy for example, an older white woman who had spent most of her life in Rockdale, described what it was like in the 70s during a time when generational differences between parents and their children sometimes caused disagreement over the issue of biracial socializing in the community. While at work one day Anne received a call from her teenage son Peter who had borrowed a school phone to get in touch with her. “Mom,” he said, “can Jake come home with me and study tonight? Is that all right?” She didn’t know Jake but agreed for him to ride the bus home with her son and also offered to pick up cheeseburgers for dinner. “And just so you know,” her son added, “Jake is black, okay?” “Okay, that’s fine,” she replied. The boys ate supper together before spending the evening working on a school project, and the following day, Jake had Peter deliver a handwritten note for Anne in which he thanked the family for feeding him dinner.

Anne recalled that even though she had initially thought it would be fine for Jake to come over, she later worried about what her white friends would think about it. She decided to approach her son and explain that it had probably been a bad idea after all:

I said, “Peter, it’s okay that you wanted to bring a black boy to the house, but the neighbors—were they looking when you got off the bus?” And he said, “No, I don’t think so. Why? What difference does it make?” And so then his dad and I sat down to have a discussion and said, “It’s okay for you to have black friends, but I’m not sure it’s okay that you bring them here.” Those were the days where you just weren’t sure about all this stuff.

Peter became visibly upset and argued that his parents' unwillingness to welcome black people into their home was hypocritical given the Christian teachings they supposedly subscribed to. "He wrote his dad and me a note that said, 'You preach love on Sunday morning, you teach love, you've taught me to love everybody. Jesus loves you and Jake the same.' He put us in our place." Anne raised her eyebrows for emphasis as she explained the moral of the story. "I just cried. I said, 'You're absolutely right. You are absolutely right, and I am so sorry.' I think what I learned is you better be careful what you say to kids, and how your actions are different than what you say."

Over time, norms in local communities continued to shift such that mixed-race socializing became more acceptable, but even still, black families were often faced with uncertainty as to whether they would be offered unprejudiced hospitality by their white acquaintances. One white woman remembered that sometime in the late 70s or early 80s she planned a baby shower for a coworker and invited all of the women in her department, some of whom were black. As guests began arriving to the woman's Atlanta home, one of the black women cracked the front door open slightly and asked, "Do you want me to use the back door?" The hostess recalled feeling embarrassed at first that her colleague didn't feel welcome to walk through the front door with confidence, but she better understood the woman's predicament after she explained herself. "It's not you I was worried about. It was your neighbors. What would your neighbors think?" Instances like these highlight ambiguities associated with the South's history of changing black-white race-relations and serve as reminders of how different things were not so long ago.

As Rockdale's older residents remembered that many white Southerners had formerly refused to welcome black neighbors into their homes, they also recalled that white churches had often denied hospitality to black people as well. One white woman from Rockdale remembered that First Baptist Church of Madison, Georgia, located in a neighboring county, had once refused to accommodate two women visiting from Africa on account of their being black. "First Baptist had written a check to my sister-in-law Mary every year that she was on the mission field in Africa to support her work," the woman explained. "But when two African ladies came to the United States to visit her when she was home on furlough with breast cancer, Mary's aunt from the

church said, ‘Well they can’t stay here. And they can’t come to First Baptist.’ The woman’s family intervened however and arranged for their own congregation, a smaller, lower-status church in Conyers, to host the visiting women instead. “And our little country church just welcomed them and prayed with them and danced with them and had a dinner for them—and my parents here welcomed them too. In fact one of the boys gave up his bedroom for them.” By acknowledging the historic role of white families and white churches in the systematic oppression of black people across the South, Rockdale’s older white residents seemed to accept some responsibility for the region’s legacy of racial discord. At the same time, the emphasis their stories placed on the practice of hospitality indicated that the work to achieve racial reconciliation would involve symbolic gestures of warm welcomes and gracious manners as well.

Creating Networks of Reciprocity

Evidence that this historic legacy of race-based discrimination continues to powerfully shape social life in communities across the South is in no short supply, but for residents of Rockdale it was the fact that local black and white Christians remained largely segregated into black and white churches which served as a constant reminder of the region’s reputation for racial prejudice. As one middle-aged black woman observed, “The eleven o’clock hour on Sunday is the most segregated hour of the week.” Many of Rockdale’s leaders expressed their concern that this separation between black and white Christians could be corrosive to the community’s wellbeing if clergy did not take special care to nurture biracial alliances among their congregants. Ruth Wilson for example, the black woman elected Clerk of Courts, observed that black and white churches too often appeared to be rivalling one another instead of working together to serve the community’s needs:

As you know, Rockdale has a church on every third corner. The competition between those churches is fascinating. The competition between the black churches and the white churches is an issue. As I told you, we’ve got a lot of people that want to help, but what tends to happen is that the white churches line up and do things together, and the black churches support each other. But there’s no cross-pollination. There has been an effort to create more of that, and there is some progress, but not on the scale it needs to be.

I asked her if any of Rockdale's pastors seemed to be leading that effort, and she said, "Well, let me give you an example: Joe LaGuardia and Layne Fields. Those are the two that I hold up as examples of what can be done." I was already well-acquainted with Pastor Joe, a middle-aged white man originally from New York, from having joined his church, Trinity Baptist. I had also met his friend and colleague Pastor Layne, a middle-aged black man who led the congregation at Old Pleasant Hill Baptist Church just across the street. "The fact that the two of them could cooperate, even if it's just one or two Sundays a year, I think that's a positive," Ruth said. "But I hate to see this continued division between the black and white churches. I really think that that's something that needs to be addressed."

Over the course of several months, Pastor Layne and Pastor Joe had co-sponsored a series of events to address black-white race relations with their respective congregations, and the highlight was a joint worship service hosted by the historic black congregation at Old Pleasant Hill. Pastor Joe promoted the event at his somewhat diverse but mostly white congregation by placing the following announcement in the weekly bulletin:

Joint Worship Service for Memorial Day Weekend

On Sunday, May 24th (Pentecost), we will be joining Old Pleasant Hill Baptist Church across the street for a joint worship service at 11 AM.

This is not a time to skip out on church, but to show our solidarity with our neighbors and partners in Christ! Pastor Joe and Pastor Layne Fields will be co-preaching; our choirs will perform a joint anthem together!

During the service, the two men delivered similar messages about how black and white Christians should be unified by their common purpose in life. Pastor Layne acknowledged that the two congregations had "different ways" and "different styles" of worshipping God but nonetheless shared "the same mission for God—we both help people who are lost." His message was affirmed by several Old Pleasant Hill parishioners who hollered "Amen!" Speaking on the meaning of Christian Pentecost, Pastor Joe emphasized "the anointing power" of the Holy Spirit and argued that "we both believe in that same anointing power." Pastor Layne nodded enthusiastically saying, "Yes, brother! That's right!" At the end of the service, Pastor Layne

reminded his congregants to be good hosts by instructing them to each introduce themselves to at least one guest before leaving. For almost twenty minutes, they circulated the sanctuary eagerly greeting their visitors with cheerful hugs and vigorous handshakes. “It is so good to have you here today,” said one woman as she held my hand in hers. “You are welcome here any Sunday, sweetheart.”

A few months later, it was Trinity’s turn to play host when Pastor Layne accepted an invitation to participate in a Wednesday night Bible study discussion on race relations in Rockdale. When Pastor Joe brought up the South’s history of racialized violence, Pastor Layne explained that there are significant generational differences regarding local black people’s impressions of their community. While his younger congregants tended to perceive black-white race relations to be generally positive, the church’s elders reportedly struggled to move past the discrimination and segregation which had characterized their childhoods. “There are two versions of Conyers,” Pastor Layne explained, “the Old Conyers and the New Conyers.”

Pastor Joe picked up this same theme again during a discussion about Black Lives Matter several weeks later. He provided participants in his Bible study group with a few facts and figures on racial inequality in the United States in order to explain the significance of structural racism. After summarizing disparities in inherited wealth and access to healthcare, he stated plainly that “Christian churches have a legacy of racial discrimination in this country.” “There was a time not that long ago,” added one elderly white man, “when white churches closed the doors on blacks in their communities.” In arguing that churches have a responsibility to promote racial reconciliation, Pastor Joe provided a list of ideas on how to move things forward including “know your story,” “listen to the stories of others,” and “ask What is Trinity doing to help racial reconciliation in Rockdale?” In discussing how to put these ideas into practice, several participants suggested that biracial hospitality rituals are the best way to build meaningful relationships. “Breaking bread together, actually sitting down at the same table and sharing a meal and learning about each other’s lives is so important,” said one older white man. “We, as Christians, we have to be willing to say that we are all the same in God’s eyes, that it doesn’t

matter whether you are black or white, you belong here just as much as I do,” echoed a middle-aged white woman. “Yes,” agreed Pastor Joe, “you are here as a part of *all* God’s creation.”

By taking turns hosting one another for worship and Bible study, Pastor Layne and Pastor Joe created a network of reciprocity among their congregations aimed at addressing the South’s violent history of racial discord and ultimately achieving black-white racial reconciliation in Rockdale. And in using the practice of hospitality to symbolize their unified efforts, they leveraged black and white Christians’ shared understanding of the elective affinity between Southern hospitality and Christian hospitality to promote a common sense of belonging among their congregants. But while church leaders like these promoted biracial unity by organizing occasional co-sponsored events, others invited their neighbors to form more official partnerships symbolizing their long-term commitment to ending black-white segregation.

The Church at Conyers Christian Ministries and Wesley Community Fellowship for example, small churches of primarily black and white members respectively, decided to combine their groups together and create one larger mixed-race congregation. The merger was announced in a local newspaper article in which *Rockdale Citizen* staff correspondent Beth Sexton profiled each of the congregation’s pastors.¹⁶⁹ After having shared building facilities for several years, the black minister Pastor Moses Little reported that God revealed to him a divine plan to join the two groups together as one. “There is only one God, one holy spirit and one church,” he told Sexton. “God loves everybody. I already saw it. God revealed it to me that, ‘Y’all have to come together.’” Already convinced of God’s plan for his church, he was delighted when the white minister Pastor Tony Elder invited The Church at Conyers to begin joining Wesley Community Fellowship for weekly worship services. “We are taking this step in order to better reflect the community in which we’re located,” Pastor Tony explained. “Whatever we do, we want to emphasize our unity rather than our differences.” In explaining his theological rationale for

¹⁶⁹ Sexton, “Two Local Churches Combine for Sunday Services.”

nurturing bi-racial Christian community, Pastor Moses argued that black and white followers of Jesus belong together:

People need to get a clear understanding of what the Bible says about coming together. Church is one of the most discriminating places in the world. There's a misunderstanding. God doesn't have a separate heaven or a separate hell or separate compassion ... You can't look at race. You can't look at creed. You look at the heart. If we can get along at work, we can get along at church.

Pastor Tony admitted that the two congregations would have to negotiate some of their differences but said “we’re in agreement on the main thing”—“we’re preaching, teaching and trying to save souls,” said Pastor Moses. By welcoming their parishioners to collaborate on a mixed-race endeavor to desegregate church life in Rockdale, these pastors effectively nurtured a sense of biracial belonging among the community’s black and white Christians.

Many pastors utilized their own social networks in Rockdale to build bridges across the local black-white color line, but others had the help of denominational networks as they participated in larger-scale efforts to overcome divisions between black and white churches across the South. The national organization New Baptist Covenant for example, founded by former United States President Jimmy Carter in 2007, provided local congregations with a framework for creating sacred partnerships in their own communities:

Across the country, congregations from the same city—sometimes as close as down the street from one another—who frequently serve historically segregated communities come together to nurture their relationships and transform their community. After serious and hard conversations about what it means to form a Covenant of Action with each other, the congregations identify a pressing issue to work together to address. Covenant of Action projects have included literacy programs, food justice initiatives and economic development advocacy.¹⁷⁰

As *The New York Times* reported, “Mr. Carter founded the New Baptist Covenant by reaching out to black and white Baptist associations, many of which had split many years ago over slavery.

¹⁷⁰ New Baptist Covenant, “Our Calling.”

Nearly 15,000 people from 30 Baptist associations attended the founding meeting in 2008.”¹⁷¹

Among New Baptist Covenant’s partner congregations are many of the South’s most prominent voices in social justice and civil rights, including for example Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta, where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. formerly served as pastor.

According to New Baptist Covenant’s executive director, black and white churches in Dallas, Macon, St. Louis, Birmingham, and Atlanta had successfully formed covenants with one another to form biracial coalitions in their own communities, and back in Rockdale, members of Trinity Baptist Church were invited to participate in the making of a new covenant between two state-level organizations, The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, Trinity’s primary denominational affiliate, and New Era Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia. Despite its relatively diverse membership, the former maintained a white majority after having been founded by moderates and progressives who split from the Southern Baptist Convention in 1991; the latter could be described as a historic black organization known for their work to expand opportunities for upward mobility. *Baptist News Global* reported that the two organizations chose to formalize their “longstanding friendship” because they were drawn to New Baptist Covenant’s ambition “to foster racial reconciliation through fellowship and shared missions and ministries.”¹⁷² A ceremony on April 15th, 2016 made the covenant official as black and white leaders from their respective organizations committed to “a long-term relationship between two neighbors” focused on “concrete ministry and mission in Georgia.”¹⁷³ A representative from CBF explained that the two groups would work toward a shared vision of creating what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called “beloved community.” “We want a world in which black and white work together, pray together, eat together,” he said, “where there is interconnectedness between our congregations.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Goodstein, “Jimmy Carter, Seeing Resurgence of Racism, Plans Baptist Conference for Unity.”

¹⁷² Weaver, “2 Baptist Groups, Longtime Friends, Make Relationship Official.”

¹⁷³ Broome, “2 Baptist Groups Cooperate on Mission Initiatives.”

¹⁷⁴ Weaver, “2 Baptist Groups, Longtime Friends, Make Relationship Official.”

The first jointly-planned mission project was a work day in Griffin, Georgia on the grounds of the New Era Baptist Convention Center where freezing temperatures that past winter had caused pipes to burst and flood the facility. Approximately 250 people from all across the state showed up to spend the day removing moldy sheetrock, hauling away ruined furniture, and applying fresh coats of paint. For a midday break, we all packed into the center's assembly hall for a casual worship service including congregational hymns, prayer, and words of thanks for all the volunteers. Meanwhile, a group of older black women prepared a lunch buffet of ham and turkey sandwiches with fresh lettuce and tomatoes accompanied by chips, cookies, and fruit. Before eating, a black pastor blessed the meal and thanked the New Era ladies for their "hard work and hospitality" in having organized a meal for such a large crowd. "Now, let's all enjoy some fellowship together," he said, "and let's be encouraged to overcome our differences as we come together and break bread together."

By including one another in the practice of hospitality, Rockdale's black and white Christians made a concerted effort to address the fact that white Southerners had historically excluded their black neighbors from feeling welcome in their own communities. And at the same time, they fostered a sense of mutual belonging among black and white families by emphasizing their common religious identities as Christians. Indeed some even argued that religious identity should trump racial identity altogether, including for example one middle-aged black woman who said, "Before I'm an African-American I'm a Christian ... I'm not representing myself as an African-American woman, I'm representing myself as a child of God." This joint effort to achieve racial reconciliation reveals how the manifestation of hospitality as lived religion was used to strategically overcome difference and nurture mixed-race collaboration in Rockdale. In the final chapter however, I'll illustrate how black and white Christians excluded and marginalized others by either refusing or neglecting to welcome them on equal terms.

CHAPTER 4

ALL ARE WELCOME HERE?: HOSPITALITY AND THE REPRODUCTION OF INEQUALITY

Robert Phillips paused to think for a moment about where he'd like to meet me for lunch the following day. An 80-year-old white man originally from Brooklyn, he had spent the majority of his life working as an Episcopal chaplain in Metro Atlanta and wanted to share his thoughts on religiosity and hospitality in Rockdale. "Well, how about Waffle House?" he asked. As a longtime fan of the iconic Southern restaurant chain, all I needed was clarification as to which of Rockdale's six Waffle House locations would be most convenient for him. "Oh uh, I forgot there were so many," he said. "We have almost as many Waffle Houses here as we do houses of worship! Let's do the one in Olde Town right where you get off the interstate."

The next day we took our seats at a booth in the back corner and placed our orders—a Diet Coke with hash browns scattered, smothered, and covered for me and a black coffee with a double pecan waffle for Robert. "So, Southern hospitality," he said, as if to ceremoniously announce our topic of conversation, "I've been here thirty years, which is more time than I spent up North, and I must tell you that I think it is largely *a myth*." Both intrigued by his claim and impressed that he had wasted no time getting to the heart of the matter, I waited with bated breath for him to elaborate. "When we first came down here we had a neighbor who seemed like a very nice fellow, and we chatted briefly. One of the first things he said when introducing himself, he said, 'We belong to Corinthian Baptist Church. Would you like to come to our church?'" Robert's pursed lips and furrowed brow suggested that his neighbor's question had been an irritating one. "Well, that set me back a little bit because I'm not interested in anybody's religion right off the bat necessarily." "Even as a retired chaplain," I asked, "even as a former priest?" "Correct," he said, "and furthermore, it's not just this fellow who approached us that way, but others as well. So I have seen that over thirty years—this is our church would we like to come." He took a sip of his steaming hot coffee and added, "If you say no, they get a little—you sense a little—I don't want to say hostility, but a version of that. They're not interested in developing a relationship."

I asked Robert if he perceived this pattern to be uniquely Southern, and he replied, “Well, I left the North at age 28, and in those 28 years, I never remember anybody introducing themselves and in the same breath asking me if I’d like to join their church.” “It doesn’t happen in society up North—it just doesn’t happen,” he said plainly. “It would come up in conversation if the relationship develops, I’m sure. But it’s not something that is important to them.” Then, in an apparent contradiction of his original claim that Southern hospitality is a myth, Robert went on to depict Southern church life as exceptionally preoccupied with ritual displays of genuine hospitality. For example, he argued that Southern churches do a better job of honoring guests by formally acknowledging them during Sunday morning services. “In the North they don’t introduce visitors—at least in the Episcopal tradition we don’t introduce anybody. The priest may welcome all the visitors back but without asking any visitor to stand up and be recognized. That’s the lack of hospitality there.” He also explained that while black and white Christians in the North and South tend to be similarly segregated into black and white congregations, only in the South had he felt particularly welcome to participate in activities at black churches:

There’s a Missionary Baptist Church not far from my house, and I go there every Wednesday night for their Bible study. I thought to myself, “I don’t know what these people believe. The sign says ‘Christian’ so they must be Bible people.” So I walked in, and I bet there were thirty-five to forty people, mostly adults, in the congregation at that time. A black church, an all-black congregation, and I’m the only white guy. The pastor started with a smile and said, “Come on in.” And he said, “You missed it.” I said, “I missed what? You finished the service?” He said, “Yeah.” I said, “But the sign—” and he said, “Yeah, I know. It’s Daylight Savings Time and we forgot to change it.” He said, “Deacon Matthew, will you give Robert a five-minute summary of what we discussed today?”

Robert paused for dramatic effect. “Can you beat that? That would virtually never happen up North. Wouldn’t happen. So Matthew spent five or so minutes clueing me in, which I thought was very welcoming.” According to Robert, the congregation had gone out of their way to make him feel included and subsequently encouraged him to keep coming back each week. “Ever since then, I go, as a I say, almost every week, and I’m the only white guy, and they refer to me as Brother Robert, see? They always greet me as I do them. And it’s not just a ‘Hi, Robert.’ No, it’s a hug. It’s a hug and a ‘How are you feeling?’”

Given his glowing remarks about church hospitality in Rockdale, I was beginning to lose sight of Robert's argument about Southern hospitality being little more than a myth. But then all of a sudden his tone and posture changed. He leaned over and lowered his voice, speaking almost in a whisper, as he recalled a series of events which portrayed that same Missionary Baptist congregation in a very different light. "It was about maybe a year ago. And the pastor starts his presentation. 'No Bible study tonight. We're going to talk about gay people. Homosexuality.'" Robert winced as he recalled the content of the pastor's message:

It would make your skin crawl the way he was putting down God's creatures. What person who has faith and knows anything about death could ever believe that this other creature who is a gift from God was hated by God? It was the traditional thing you would hear about from fundamentalist preachers. They must get it in the seminary. I'm almost convinced of that. They have memorized all the scriptural passages from the Old Testament as well as the New, showing you that "This is an abomination, God himself said it, and there it is. There are the words. And we don't interpret it. We take the word literally. So we don't put any other spin on it." So that really surprised me, and I was disappointed.

Even though Robert had developed a reputation for speaking his mind during Bible study, that night he sat in silence instead. "The pastor knows, as everybody in our congregation knows, if I feel strongly about something, I feel free to express that. I just raise my hand and they'll acknowledge it and I just say whatever. That night, I didn't say a word. Didn't say a word." "How come?" I asked. "There was no point. There was just no point. They're too old to be changed. They have no concept of God's love." Robert had hoped that maybe the pastor's remarks were not representative of the congregation's views, but not long thereafter he was confronted with similar commentary from two of his fellow churchgoers:

There were two lovely ladies that belonged to that congregation, and they're long-term friends. One is a retired nurse, and the other one's an office manager. Such lovely people. And I said, "Come on over a while. I want to visit with you all. Let's go to my home." They came, much to my delight and surprise. And somehow we got onto homosexuality. I don't know how it came up. And one of them just saw red and she went for it. "They're no good. They're sinful. We have to try to convert them."

This time, Robert tried explaining his own views and even shared some of his personal experiences with gay and lesbian friends and colleagues, but the two women became

increasingly agitated and argumentative until they finally decided to cut their visit short. “So anyway, that’s the last time they came by,” Robert said.

In comparing and contrasting this range of experiences, Robert portrayed the culture of Southern hospitality as fundamentally contradictory. “So they are very warm. They’re very inviting,” he said, speaking of the folks at the Missionary Baptist church, “but on some level—I for one do not understand how anybody can believe that there is a loving God who would exclude a whole part of his congregation, his creation, especially when he made them the way they are.” From Robert’s point of view, the warm welcomes he had personally received at so many local churches were diminished by the knowledge that his gay and lesbian neighbors were just as likely to be subjected to ridicule and rejection instead. Given this inconsistency, Robert concluded that mythic images of Southern hospitality tended to obscure from view just how hostile an environment Rockdale could be for groups who tended to be excluded by the community’s black-white Christian majority. “They have signs on all these Christian churches—‘All are welcome here,’” he said. “But I dare you to walk in any one of those churches with a black same-sex partner and see what happens.”

In this chapter, I’ll explain how people like Robert came to see Southern hospitality as a myth as they observed a variety of practices through which minority groups were made to feel rejected and excluded by Rockdale’s black-white Christian majority. I’ll introduce three concepts in order to explain how the practice of hospitality functioned to maintain social inequalities within the local community. First, I’ll use the case of sexual minorities to show how conditional hospitality required LGBTQ people and their allies to meet specific criteria in order to receive warm welcomes. Then I’ll draw on examples of racial-ethnic minorities to illustrate how limited hospitality ultimately segregated Hispanic/Latino families into socially isolated religious groups. And finally, I’ll employ the case of religious minorities to explain how Catholics and Jews negotiated difficulties associated with superficial hospitality.

Conditional Hospitality and Sexual Minorities

The Politics of Belonging at Church

Despite the frequency and regularity with which Rockdale's black and white Christian congregations used hospitality rituals to impress visitors and attract new members, their so-called open invitations were often accompanied by church sanctions which restricted the full inclusion of certain types of people. For example, controversies surrounding the status of LGBTQ individuals and their allies revealed that many of the community's most influential religious organizations were unwilling to welcome sexual minorities on equal terms as heteronormative and cisgender people. Through a practice I call *conditional hospitality*, these organizations ultimately focused on emphasizing rather than overcoming differences as they required community members to meet certain criteria in order to receive warm welcomes.

In one particularly memorable series of events, First Baptist Church of Conyers revoked the hospitality they had formerly extended to local Boy Scout Troop 973 after the Boy Scouts of America national executive board announced that gay men would no longer be disallowed from serving as troop leaders. For ten years prior, the troop had been permitted to operate out of a cedar cabin owned by the church, and as a token of their appreciation, the boys had taken responsibility for maintaining the structure and cleaning up the surrounding grounds. But after the ban on gay leaders was lifted in July 2015, First Baptist evicted Troop 973 and instructed them to vacate the premises by October of that same year. During an evening news segment on Atlanta's ABC affiliate WSB-TV, correspondent Berndt Peterson provided live coverage from Rockdale including clips of an interview he had conducted with First Baptist's Executive Pastor Craig Beall.¹⁷⁵ In the interview, Pastor Craig explained how the church had become concerned two years earlier when Boy Scouts of America formally permitted gay boys to participate in

¹⁷⁵ WSB-TV, "Church and Boy Scout Troop Part Ways after Decision on Gay Leaders."

scouting. At that point the church revised their charter with Troop 973 to include a provision which would terminate their partnership should gay men ever be allowed to serve as troop leaders. Perhaps trying to minimize any potential fallout, Pastor Craig defended the eviction to Peterson saying, "We simply acted on a decision we made a little over two years ago."

In the days that followed however, the church's decision to kick the Boy Scout's off their property created somewhat of a scandal. I spoke to several local clergy who expressed a range of both approving and disapproving views on the eviction, but none were willing to speak to me on the record for fear of generating backlash among their professional peers and/or parishioners. Several speculated about whether another church would offer to host the boys, and within a few weeks it became common knowledge that Philadelphia First United Methodist Church, a historic congregation which had been active in Rockdale since 1837, agreed to take them in.¹⁷⁶

Laypeople were more willing than clergy to speak freely on the topic, including one elderly white man who belonged to a local Baptist church and had participated in scouting himself. "I'll tell you this," he said, "I never thought I would see the day when the big ol' Baptist church would abandon the Boy Scouts of America. It's a shame." He went on to argue that even though he personally believed homosexuality to be perfectly natural and acceptable, he was willing to respect the fact that many religious people view it as sinful. "But even still, why would you shun people for it? You say you're a church trying to save sinners. Which sinners exactly? They're hypocrites! They think divorce is a sin too, but you don't see them kicking out divorced people."

Several others I spoke to similarly made a distinction between the question of whether homosexuality is a sin and the question of whether First Baptist ought to have behaved so inhospitably, and one local's remarks in the comment section of an online news story typified the sort of reaction many others shared with me:

Rev. Beall, I am deeply disappointed in the church's action and reaction to the partnership with Boy Scouts. To evict scout membership is beyond an approach that our Lord would expect of us as Christians to embrace all. We could debate endlessly

¹⁷⁶ Philadelphia United Methodist Church, "Church History."

but that is not the issue. Your church will be now known as less than inclusive and for that decision made two years ago you will now alienate both boy scouts and families from your church. It speaks volumes as to how your denomination (and I was raised Baptist from birth so I am not a Baptist-basher but one of you and I am a homeowner very close to your church) but to belittle as you did on television casts a judgmental attitude. Your views will now permeate throughout where your Methodist brethren will be seen as accepting with love to give space to your evicted scouts ...

Here is a cabin that was worked on and salvaged only to be “thanked” by eviction. Not fair, First Baptist, not fair, and words of yours were powerful in how divisive they were perceived. I am hopeful that with prayer and true guidance from above, your governing body will realize the effects this has caused and somehow will show the love of Christian brotherhood in the name of our Father, whose love conquers all ...

Please see this not as a rebuke but as a message of hope that somehow you can recreate a less divisive message to those in the community who look to you at First Baptist as a leader in the community. Let God judge ... let the Holy Spirit convict ... and let's just love with a spirit of compassion so that those who are in error can see that love and acceptance doesn't mean we condone behavior but that we can love each other even in the error of our ways ...

THINK THROUGH THIS MESSAGE YOU ARE SENDING, PLEASE, as they don't deserve eviction and the eviction is not just from a cabin it's from a worship place, a hospital for sinners, not a place for sinless saints as your message resounded loud and clear ...¹⁷⁷

From this point of view, Christian congregations have a moral duty to make others feel welcome regardless of whatever disagreements they may have over controversial issues like homosexuality. But First Baptist seemed to be saying that churches like theirs should instead refuse to associate with organizations whose views do not square with their own, and denying hospitality to a local Boy Scout troop seemed to symbolize their unwillingness to accept homosexuals on equal terms as heterosexuals.

I sat down with Pastor Craig to learn more about his congregation and asked whether he had intended to become so embroiled in the politics of LGBTQ inclusion. “We don't seek it out ever,” he said, “but it finds you, and we don't have any problem speaking on record.” He went on

¹⁷⁷ Rand, “First Baptist Church of Conyers Leaving Boy Scouts after Gay Ban Lifted.”

to argue that the issue was religious, not political. “If it’s a Biblical value, we will speak on it. We don’t speak on political issues or elections or anything like that. But if it’s a Biblical, moral value, we have no issue.” I asked if the controversy had caused any conflict within his own congregation, and he replied, “Not at all, uh-uh.” “The whole thing is, we welcome homosexuals here,” he continued, “but it was—we were not going to go into a signed partnership, because it’s a full eight-page contract really that you agree with the Boy Scouts—we were not going to stand with that organization.” His claim that “we welcome homosexuals here” gave me pause, and I asked him to elaborate. “To worship, to Bible study, to membership,” he said, before quickly adding, “well, we would not allow them into membership, but we know plenty of people struggling with that who are here.” I pressed for clarification asking, “Are there people who worship with you who openly identify as homosexual?” “Not people who openly identify,” he said slowly, as if choosing his words carefully, “but who struggle with it.”

Given the Southern Baptist Convention’s very public crusade to preserve “Biblical marriage,”¹⁷⁸ I was already familiar with Pastor Craig’s language portraying homosexuality as a temptation to commit sin instead of a legitimate sexual orientation. In fact Southern Baptist leaders often use the term “struggle” in reference to same-sex attraction, including for example in a series of podcasts produced by The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, SBC’s public policy arm, which includes titles like “Practical Steps for Ministering to Those who Struggle with Same-Sex Attraction”¹⁷⁹ and “How Does the Gospel Equip Christians who Struggle with Same-Sex Attraction.”¹⁸⁰ In one recording titled “Is It Okay to Be Gay? A Candid Conversation on Christians and Same-Sex Attraction,” a panel of pastors and other leaders discuss their criticisms of increasingly popular language which conveys an acceptance of homosexuality. The audio clip

¹⁷⁸ See, for example, the Southern Baptist Convention’s resolutions “On ‘Same-Sex Marriage’ and Civil Rights Rhetoric,” “On the Call to Public Witness on Marriage,” and “On Biblical Sexuality and the Freedom of Sexuality.”

¹⁷⁹ The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, “Practical Steps for Ministering to Those who Struggle with Same-Sex Attraction.”

¹⁸⁰ The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, “How Does the Gospel Equip Christians who Struggle with Same-Sex Attraction.”

begins with one panel member raising a question about people who identify themselves as gay Christians:

We have several in the evangelical movement who would describe themselves as gay Christians. They're celibate, chaste, not actively involved in any form of sexual immorality. They agree with the Biblical teaching, the church's teaching on sexuality and marriage, but they want to use that language of "gay Christian" for a variety of reasons. How should we respond to that? Is that a good thing? Is it something we ought to be concerned about?

"I don't like it," another panelist quickly responds, "It's like, 'Yeah I'm a blaspheming Christian.' I don't know how one title that represents that I glorify God can be coupled with a title of sin that God hates."¹⁸¹ Likewise, "The Baptist Faith and Message," SBC's official statement of faith, unequivocally categorizes homosexuality as a form of "sexual immorality" and defines marriage as "the uniting of one man and one woman ... the channel of sexual expression according to Biblical standards."¹⁸²

As an SBC congregation, First Baptist of Conyers is beholden to this document, stating on their website that, "We believe the best summary of who we are is expressed in the Baptist Faith and Message."¹⁸³ Knowing the content of these materials, I asked Pastor Craig what would happen if an openly gay person sought membership in his church, and he explained, "We'd deal with it if they wanted to become a member. We have not had that situation happen, but we've had it with other things, what we would describe as immoral things, where we have to say, 'No, right now we cannot accept you into membership.'" By requiring potential recruits to either identify as heterosexual or at least define their homosexuality in terms of a struggle with same-sex attraction, a sin they need to repent of, the church effectively placed conditions on who they were willing to welcome into membership. And by evicting Troop 973, they used the practice of

¹⁸¹ The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, "Is It Okay to Be Gay? A Candid Conversation on Christians and Same-Sex Attraction."

¹⁸² Southern Baptist Convention, "Baptist Faith and Message."

¹⁸³ First Baptist Church of Conyers, "What We Believe."

conditional hospitality to communicate their unwillingness to accept those who view the issue differently.

As several of Rockdale's more prominent figures recalled, one Baptist church had caused a bit of a stir several years earlier by refusing to comply with the otherwise standard practice of offering only conditional hospitality to LGBTQ members of the community. At Trinity Baptist Church, the congregation my husband and I would later join, Pastor Joe LaGuardia had come under fire for having overseen the ordination of a gay church deacon who was nominated and approved through the appropriate channels of congregational church governance. Other pastors from a local Baptist association threatened to publically disfellowship the congregation at Trinity—a procedure which was likely to make headlines in local newspapers—unless they were willing to either remove the deacon from office or quietly withdraw from the denominational association. Trinity's members urged Pastor Joe to protect the deacon they had installed by simply walking away from the organization of Baptist churches. As one member of the church recalled, "We were being bullied, and I really wanted to make them kick us out just so they would be exposed for who they are. But you had to think of what a public scandal might have caused for our deacon and their family. It was better to just keep it quiet to protect their privacy."

When Andrew and I first began visiting Trinity, several members each shared this story with us in an apparent attempt to demonstrate that the church does not practice the type of conditional hospitality common in so many other congregations. As one woman explained, "When we say all are welcome here, we mean *all*." Likewise, when I asked Pastor Joe to describe his vision of Trinity's purpose in Rockdale, he said, "We're here to reach people who are not comfortable in other churches, people who have been abused by churches, people who aren't being reached by other churches, and people who are just fed up with Baptist life as usual." He continued by comparing Trinity to the many other Baptist churches in the area:

We have "Baptist" in our name, so we're thrown in with all of these Baptist churches ... It's a traditional church, but it's very progressive, and it's very diverse in its approach to ministry ... The worship may be more traditional, but our approach to people and ministry can be very, I think, progressive in many ways. I don't really use the word "progressive" to newcomers, but I usually say, "It's very unique in that we're diverse. We welcome all people." We're one of the few Baptist churches in the town who have

diversity in its politics and its theology. I assume most other Baptist churches are monolithic.

In emphasizing that newcomers are welcome to join the church regardless of their politics, theology, or sexuality, statements like these effectively highlighted the types of conditions which often accompanied the practice of hospitality at Rockdale's more typical Christian organizations.

The Politics of Belonging at Home

LGBTQ community members and their allies were often required to meet certain criteria in order to receive warm welcomes at local congregations and larger Christian organizations, but they also negotiated the politics of belonging as their families and friends practiced conditional hospitality in their own homes as well. For example, young people who lived with their parents and secretly identified as gay or lesbian were sometimes at risk of being kicked out if their sexual orientations became exposed. One such teenager, Allie Brown, shared with me the traumatic experience she had after coming out as gay to her immediate and extended family members. Initially scared that her father's strict Christian faith would prevent him from accepting her homosexuality, Allie became hopeful after he seemed to react calmly to the news. Over subsequent weeks however, she began to sense that he was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the idea. "Finally I said to my dad, 'You don't talk about it, and you don't look at me. And when you do you make me feel bad so I don't even want to be around you sometimes,'" she explained. "And he was just like, 'Well, I don't really know how I feel about you being around your little brothers.'"

A heated argument ensued in which Allie's father insisted that gay and lesbian people are bad influences on young children before explaining that she would no longer be welcome in his home. "So what did you do?" I asked. "Well, I stayed in my car, I stayed with friends, stuff like that." She spent the following few months dodging encounters with law enforcement and trying to find stable housing to no avail. "My aunt told me that I wasn't allowed in her house," Allie explained, "she just doesn't want me around her kids in the house." With nowhere to go, she eventually sought help from a social worker who found accommodations at a group home in a

neighboring county. I asked what her living conditions were like and she said, “Well, it sort of sucks to be in a shelter kind of place, you know? But they know I’m gay, and they don’t care. Or at least they’re not allowed to care. They can’t put me out on the street just because they don’t like that I’m gay. So I’m safe.” In Allie’s case, much more than church membership or denominational associations were at stake as the practice of conditional hospitality meant that basic needs could be denied to her and others who embraced “a sinful lifestyle.”

Other times it was a family’s willingness to welcome their LGBTQ kin which resulted in conflict with other devout Christians. Ben Holt for example, an older man born and raised in Rockdale, recalled that one of his neighbors had been completely shunned by her Baptist church after she took in her adult gay son who was suffering from complications due to HIV/AIDS. “She’s a staunch Baptist, belonged to the same local church for decades, and everybody knows her very well,” the man explained. “So she has seen pastors come and go in that time, and people told me if the pastors ever wanted anything done, she’s the first one they went to. They would pass her name down to the next guy.” All of that changed however after her son fell ill and came home to be with his family:

He called his mother and said, “Mom, this is the story. Can I come home?” And she said, “Of course.” So now she’s taking care of her son. And the pastor doesn’t call her anymore, does not visit as he used to, does not buy her a cup of coffee and chat about a program that he wants her to help on. None of that happens anymore. So the mother’s got her hands full with this young man, and one of her neighbors says to her, “You know why the pastor doesn’t call you anymore?” She said, “No I don’t.” She said, “He told us that your son is getting exactly what he deserves as a result of his sinful lifestyle.”

Ben shook his head in disgust at the church pastor saying, “This is a man who mounts the pulpit and professes to speak for Christ and says something like that to his congregation. I don’t understand that kind of a sham. I really don’t understand it. Very, very sad.”

Given the sometimes cruel culture of hospitality in Rockdale, one organization sought to provide LGBTQ people and their allies with unconditional acceptance and support. Out in the Country—its cheeky name a reference to the association between rural settings and conservative

attitudes—first came to my attention when I read a local newspaper article explaining the group’s history and purpose in Rockdale:

In the bustling heart of Atlanta—often hailed as the LGBT headquarters of the South—finding gay-friendly locales such as restaurants, bars and retailers is easier than getting stuck in traffic on the Downtown Connector. LGBT residents in Rockdale and Newton, however, are faced with a more difficult task of finding somewhere to fully express themselves and not feel stigmatized or alienated for doing so, said Kevin Drury, a longtime member of Out in the Country.¹⁸⁴

Founded by Jack McBride, a former Catholic priest interested in counteracting Christians’ prejudicial treatment of gay and lesbian couples, Out in the Country came to function as a sort of refuge, a true sanctuary, for local LGBTQ residents. Meeting each month in a private residence at an undisclosed location, members gathered together for meals, discussions, and workshops aimed at achieving some sense of belonging in spite of experiences which so often left them feeling excluded and rejected.

I attended several of these get-togethers which featured long hours of lively storytelling and discussion. For example, one evening a gay Vietnam War veteran described the difficulty he had experienced with fellow soldiers in the military and offered encouragement to those struggling to succeed in hostile work environments. Another time a lesbian couple described obstacles they had encountered with their children’s school teachers and offered advice on approaching public school administrators. Before helping themselves to the dinner buffet—usually a bountiful potluck of fresh fried chicken, deli-style potato salad, and homemade cakes and cookies—attendees were typically gathered round the living room so that Jack could “say grace.” “It’s important for me to make clear that this is not a religious organization,” he explained at one meeting. “We are not affiliated with a religion, and we welcome people regardless of their religious views. But many of our members are religious, and we do like to say grace before the meal.” We all bowed our heads and closed our eyes as Jack blessed the food and thanked God for our time of fellowship.

¹⁸⁴ McKenzie, “Out in the Country Provides Support for LGBT Community in Rockdale and Newton.”

Later, I mentioned to some of the group's long-time members that their meetings reminded me of the sort of socializing common in local churches, and they agreed that in many ways, Out in the Country had functioned as something like a church for people who felt rejected by the Christian traditions they had been raised with. "Well, actually, you could say that we *are* a church," said one man. "Everybody knows Jack will do communion for us. All we have to do is ask. He'll have the bread and the wine out there on the front porch, and we'll have the Lord's Supper, and that will be church." "Well if we're a church then I guess we're a Catholic church," interjected a woman sitting nearby, "because you know Baptists use Welch's grape juice!" Several of us laughed heartily at the expense of teetotaler-types as the man replied, "Oh now that was a good one!" On my drive home that night I considered how Out in the Country had indeed offered refuge to people who often experienced rejection and even persecution by Rockdale's black-white Christian majority. In response to the conditional hospitality through which so many religious organizations refused to include their LGBTQ neighbors, Out in the Country had extended their own warm welcome and created a safe haven for some of the community's most marginalized members.

Limited Hospitality and Racial-Ethnic Minorities

The Offer of Lukewarm Welcomes

Like their non-Hispanic black and white counterparts, many of the Latino newcomers I spoke to reported having been invited to church not long after arriving to Rockdale. Some recalled feeling pleasantly surprised when black and white neighbors suggested visiting local congregations because they thought participating in the custom of regular church attendance would help them to feel more at home in their new surroundings. But subsequent interactions often revealed that initial displays of church hospitality were not intended to incorporate Hispanic/Latino transplants into the biracial networks of reciprocity black and white Christians had established for themselves. In a practice I call *limited hospitality*, Rockdale's black-white Christian majority welcomed their Hispanic/Latino neighbors to participate in church life but

ultimately segregated them into ministries for minorities instead of incorporating them into mainstream church programs.

Elena Cortes for example, a woman originally from Miami, recalled receiving multiple invitations to the same local congregation. “I was at the library with my son, and I asked a black woman there about something. I told her we were new to the area, and she said that we should go visit St. Pius, the Catholic church on the highway, because she had heard they have good programs for kids.” A few weeks later, she met a white woman who identified herself as an active member at St. Pius and encouraged Elena to bring her family to Mass that following Sunday. “I decided maybe we would go and try to get more involved in the community,” Elena explained. “We are Catholic, and at that point we didn’t know many people yet so I thought this would be good for us.” On Sunday morning Elena searched for the church’s facebook page in order to confirm the schedule of events so that she could arrive promptly. “When we got there it was very nice—the church is very pretty, and the people were very nice,” she said, but one interaction made her very uncomfortable:

There was a man, a white man, who was showing us where the sanctuary is. He was nice, but he seemed confused. He said, “Oh you know the Spanish service is later. You got here early.” And then I was confused because I didn’t know they had a Spanish service. I guess I didn’t notice that on their facebook page. But I told him that we speak English and that we wanted to be there for the English Mass. And he said, “Okay that’s fine. But you might prefer the Spanish service anyway. You might like it better.”

Elena rolled her eyes at how the man had behaved and complained to me that she felt unwelcome to visit the church again. “It was just awkward. I felt like he was assuming I didn’t know English, or assuming I need to be with my own kind, you know? Like he didn’t think my family belonged in the normal Mass.” Elena’s impression then was that the church’s invitation was not entirely open but somewhat limited, that she was only truly welcome to participate in Spanish-language programming alongside other Latino families.

Others appreciated the opportunity to attend services in Spanish and instead portrayed the afternoon Mass as a valuable time of fellowship with other immigrant families. Those with minimal English-speaking skills were especially relieved to have a space where they could

communicate openly and effectively in their native language. But still, the sense of separation from St. Pius's regular Sunday morning Mass seemed to highlight the fact that Hispanic/Latino families appeared to experience social isolation in other settings as well. For example, at a church-sponsored yard sale and ministry fair, I watched as non-Hispanic black and white attendees mingled comfortably with one another but avoided interaction with their Hispanic/Latino neighbors. At lunch time, patrons purchased hamburgers, hotdogs, and tacos from vendor booths before finding comfortable spots on the church lawn to sit and eat, but none of the mixed-race groupings I saw included Latinos. I casually observed to one of St. Pius's white members that the Latino families didn't seem to be integrated into the rest of the church's congregation and she replied, "Well you know, they're immigrants mostly, so it's tough because you don't really feel like you have much in common. But there are a lot of them, and they really sort of have their own community." Perhaps sensing my concern, she added, "I don't think they feel left out or anything. I think they're probably just happy keeping to themselves. Sometimes they have more people come to their Mass than we do ours!" I asked if she considered any of her church's Hispanic/Latino congregants to be personal friends, and she said, "Well we're friendly. I always say hi and everything. But I haven't really gotten to know any of them personally, no."

I observed a similar arrangement at First Baptist Church as members of *Iglesia Bautista Nueva Vida En Cristo*, a Hispanic Baptist congregation, were provided with meeting space and other resources at a local church-owned property. One of First Baptist's adult Sunday school classes additionally provided financial support as well as an annual luncheon honoring the Hispanic congregation's anniversary each October. I attended the 2015 celebration which featured a classic Southern-style barbecue buffet of smoked chicken, baked beans, and macaroni and cheese along with sliced jalapeños—an unusual garnish I could only interpret as a nod to Latin American cuisine. The meal was served in a fellowship hall where the all-white group from First Baptist stood behind buffet tables and served the long line of Hispanic/Latino parishioners. As people took their seats, folks from First Baptist worked as something like wait staff providing each table with cups of water, iced tea, and lemonade. "We just want to honor them by taking

good care of them today,” explained one of the men, “we’re just honoring them with our hospitality.”

Once everyone had been served however, the congregants from First Baptist fixed their own plates and ate amongst themselves, some standing outside near the barbecue smoker, others behind where the buffet was set up. They did not sit down among their honored guests to share in conversation and fellowship. They did not, in other words, break bread together. Later I interviewed one of the women from First Baptist and inquired about her relationship with the Hispanic congregation. “Well every year we take all the food and go feed them and have a big dinner-on-the-grounds kind of thing over there where they meet,” she explained. “They’re most appreciative. And this year they turned around and did a Mexican food dinner for us. And so that’s a good relationship going on there.” She went on to explain that the ritual exemplifies her understanding of Christian hospitality. “It’s a way for us to show that we welcome them and love them and want to honor them as our brothers and sisters in Christ.” I asked if over the years she had developed friendships with any of the Hispanic/Latino church members she had served lunch to, but she said, “Oh I don’t see any socializing other than that kind of thing. I don’t think that anybody’s had dinner in their homes or anything like that.” By casually dismissing the idea that people like her might spend significant amounts of time socializing with their Latino neighbors, the woman revealed how the hospitality her group offered to *Iglesia Bautista Nueva Vida En Cristo* was limited to relatively impersonal interactions during infrequent church rituals.

The Challenge of Fitting In

Rockdale’s Latino newcomers faced significant impediments to participating in the local culture of hospitality which made it difficult for them to achieve a sense of belonging among the community’s non-Hispanic majority. Perhaps the greatest of these was the language barrier between black and white families who tended to speak only English, and Latino families who varied in both their English and Spanish language skills. Though some second- and third-generation Latino immigrants spoke perfect English and knew very little Spanish, non-Hispanic black and white residents tended to assume that Latinos as a group were largely incapable of

communicating in English. Thus, the Hispanic language barrier, whether real or imagined, tended to preclude the sorts of routine interactions through which non-Hispanic black and white families practiced hospitality in their community.

One middle-aged black woman for example reportedly went out of her way to avoid public contact with Hispanic residents because she enjoyed being able to make small talk with anonymous neighbors while running errands around town. “I like to go to Walmart and just look around, and I’ve gone to the one down on Salem Road a lot recently,” she explained. “I mainly go there because the one up on Highway 138—there are so many Hispanics there. I like to be able to communicate with people, talk to them about something. And I just can’t do it as much there because of the Hispanics.” She went on to emphasize that she didn’t mind immigrants moving to Rockdale, she only wished that they spoke her own native language. “A lot of them don’t speak any English at all. And I don’t mind the minorities. I just want to be able to understand them. It is just hard when there is a language barrier.” She shared a couple of anecdotes about having casually discussed recipes and cooking techniques with other grocery store shoppers in the past before concluding, “I respect immigrants for the fact that they are so hard working and they take care of their families. I know they do that, for a fact. I don’t have any problems with them. I just want to be able to communicate.”

Those who had extensive experience working with Rockdale’s Hispanic/Latino population confirmed that they had observed language barriers to be a serious problem. For example, one bilingual Latina woman who volunteered her time at a small Hispanic congregation explained that inter-generational differences between immigrant parents and their children posed a threat to family well-being:

Something that we faced at church was the children were having a hard time communicating with their parents. Our parents, first-generation parents, they came here from Mexico or from whatever other country they came from, and they had their children here. At home, they speak Spanish, but once those kids are going to school they pick up on English. Or watching TV or whatever. So they were having that problem. There’s a barrier right now between the children and the parents. So right now in church we have the service specifically for Spanish speakers, for the parents, while the children and the youth, or the English speakers, go to Sunday school. Then we get together, we do the weekly announcements, we do the offering—mostly in

Spanish. The songs are bilingual, the pastor preaches in Spanish, and I translate to English.

Given the difficulty of overcoming language barriers with their own children, she suggested that investing in relationships with non-Hispanic black and white neighbors was simply not a realistic goal. “If communicating at home is a problem, then obviously it’s an even bigger problem outside the home in the community.” Others conveyed a sense of hope that second generation immigrant children would thrive in Rockdale given their quick mastery of the English language. “The language barrier is huge and very significant I think,” admitted one white man who directs a local non-profit serving disadvantaged families, “but I also think it’s changing.” “The parents may feel out of place and disconnected,” he explained, “but their children are making friends at school and getting integrated into the community because they know English.”

For many immigrant parents then, language barriers perhaps made it unlikely that they would be able to participate in hospitality rituals with Rockdale’s non-Hispanic majority, but for some it was simply the public perception of a language barrier that caused difficulty. Julia Escobar for example, a young woman originally from Mexico, had developed advanced English-speaking skills despite having immigrated to the United States just four years earlier. She was perfectly capable of participating in an English-language interview and only occasionally made use of a translation application on her smartphone to articulate nuanced points she had originally conceived of in Spanish. Julia described having studied English with great enthusiasm because she understood how important communication would be for helping her family to fit in among Rockdale’s non-Hispanic majority, but over time she developed the impression that most people took one look at her and assumed she couldn’t even make small talk in English.

One story in particular highlighted the discomfort Julia typically experienced when attempting to participate in customary hospitality rituals with local non-Hispanic families. One day her daughter came home from school with an invitation to a classmate’s eleventh birthday party. Sensing her daughter’s excitement and anticipation, Julia agreed that they would attend the celebration even though she had some reservations:

I was nervous because she told me he was white. And she was telling me that most of the friends are invited to the party, so I tell her, "Okay, we're going." So we went. It was a big house with a lake, and a pool house, and everything. I was not comfortable because everybody was white and black. Everybody was kind, but I didn't feel free to grab a slice of pizza. I just sat and helped my daughter change for the pool. She was putting on her swimsuit. They only spoke to me, "Hi," and that's it. They didn't make any conversation with me. They spoke more to my daughter. They just told my daughter, "Offer your mom some juice, some pizza."

Julia recalled spending most of the afternoon with no one to talk to as she observed a fun-loving group of black and white non-Hispanic mothers engage in lively discussion. "I just thought to myself, "they think that I speak no English at all, maybe." Julia's eyes welled up as the pain and embarrassment she associates with the memory became visible on her face. "How did that make you feel," I asked. "Uncomfortable. I felt like I did not belong there." In effect, the party invitation functioned as a form of limited hospitality in which Julia appreciated having been welcomed to attend a community get-together but ultimately regretted feeling out of place among her non-Hispanic neighbors.

A second obstacle which made it difficult for Latino residents to achieve a sense of belonging in Rockdale was represented by the legacy of the South's historic black-white color line, and the perception that Southerners tend to preoccupy themselves with issues pertaining to black-white race relations left many Hispanic/Latino newcomers feeling marginalized. One Latina woman for example, a second-generation Mexican immigrant, described how popular debates about the Confederate flag illustrate how Latino Southerners have few opportunities to engage in public discourse about racism:

I think Hispanics see the flag as a black versus white thing, you know. I personally don't care. It doesn't really affect me. I mean I'm like, "Well where's all the Hispanics?" because the racism issues don't really get us involved. You know, there's a time and place for everything, but the confederate flag—I see it more as a white-black thing. I mean Hispanics aren't really involved at all.

She described using social media to discuss immigration politics with friends who reside near the Mexico border in her native Texas before concluding, "I just feel like this whole racism thing that people talk about here is really a black versus white thing."

She went on to suggest that Hispanic/Latino community members are divided over which side of the color line they can most easily identify with saying, “a lot of Hispanics relate more to white people versus some relate more to black people.” I had indeed encountered a wide range of views on this topic indicating that many Latinos felt compelled to align themselves with one of the two groups. “I’m mostly scared of African-Americans,” explained one man, “just because of crime and everything, and everything you see on TV.” “They live in bad neighborhoods,” his wife added, “not safe at all.” In contrast, one woman described feeling scared of white people and elaborated on her perception that black people are especially friendly:

Most of the friends of my daughter are black. Because I ask her, “Are your friends white or black?” I ask her, “Are they Hispanic?” And she says, “No, black.” She says, “Most of my friends are black.” And I say, “Oh, okay.” And at the daycare, I have been friends with the teacher of my daughter. She’s black, and I can tell that she’s my friend. She’s not only the teacher of my kids. She’s also my friend. I can feel that.

I asked her what it was that made her feel that way, and she said, “Last Saturday I did a small party for my daughter and I invited her and she came. Everybody was Hispanic. She was the only one who was black. And she had a good time and stayed until the end.” In a community where Latino residents could expect to receive only limited hospitality from many of their non-Hispanic neighbors, exceptional instances of pleasant mixed-raced socializing symbolized that true friendships had been forged.

Superficial Hospitality and Religious Minorities

The Problem of Religious Pluralism

Rockdale’s black-white Christian majority made use of hospitality rituals to spread their beliefs and grow their churches, and while many of the community’s residents appreciated having been invited to join local congregations, others were simply not interested in becoming part of the Evangelical/Protestant mainstream. People from other faith traditions, such as Judaism and Catholicism for example, tended to appreciate the Southern culture of friendliness and courtesy but described Rockdale’s religious majority as somewhat insincere given their persistent attempts

at evangelism and stubborn disinterest in pluralism. Some even concluded that warm welcomes and good manners were often little more than a strategy for ultimately proselytizing religious minorities. Through a practice I call *superficial hospitality*, members of Rockdale's religious establishment relied on kindness and cordiality to share their Christian faith but ultimately seemed more intent on converting "non-believers" than cultivating the free exchange of ideas.

Members of Rockdale's minority religious groups tended to describe the prominence of Evangelical and Protestant culture in the community as completely overwhelming. Ellen Baker, a middle-aged Jewish woman originally from California, spoke at length about the hardships of raising children in a place where most people know or care very little about her family's religious traditions but inject their own beliefs into seemingly every aspect of daily life in the community. The casual way in which public school teachers incorporated Christian doctrine into classroom activities for example had represented an especially significant concern for her family:

My son came home from school in kindergarten telling me that Jesus died for our sins. I said, "Where did you hear this?" He said, "We talked about it at school." And so of course I'm getting upset because it's a public school. Why are you discussing this in public school? So I came in to meet with the teacher, and I said, "When my son comes home and tells me that you're talking about Jesus dying for your sins at the public school, where he's required to come to, I'm pretty angry. And I would like to talk to you about how you can be discussing religion like that in public school." And so she explained to me how they had been sitting at quiet time on the carpet, and they were talking about the season, and what goes on at that time of the season, and that it's Easter, and one of the kids brought it up.

Ellen went on to explain that she wanted her children to learn about the core tenants of multiple world religions including Christianity, but she also believed the teacher should have taken the opportunity to explain the concept of religious pluralism in an age-appropriate way. "I said, 'Well, I understand that you're talking about religion, but when you talk about that, you need to be talking about how that's what they *believe*. And you need to be discussing that there are other beliefs that go on—that Jesus dying for people's sins is a religious belief, not a fact.'"

Determined to make the best of the situation, Ellen found opportunities to become more involved at her children's school in order to monitor the religious teachings they were exposed to and also share information about Judaism with teachers interested in fostering more open

discussions about religious diversity. On occasion she was invited to explain important Jewish customs or holidays, but usually only if a teacher reported feeling obligated to recognize the presence of a Jewish student in the classroom. “When they do that for one student, it feels like the child is a token who they have to accommodate, which isn’t a good feeling,” Ellen explained. “You always feel separate. It always just feels like you’re separated, and that’s not good. It’s never actually inclusive.”

Ellen described how Christian children in Rockdale enjoyed the privilege of celebrating Christian holidays at school events while her own children’s Jewish holidays were rarely even acknowledged. “One time my son’s teacher explained to me that he got upset because it was Hanukkah, and we were in the midst of Hanukkah as a family, but they never talked about Hanukkah at school.” The teacher allowed her to make a small classroom presentation on the Jewish holiday, but Ellen had reason to fear how other parents might react to news of the educational activity. Previously she had noticed a menorah and candles among another teacher’s belongings and asked what they were to be used for. “She told me she was going to use them in the classroom, but that she couldn’t because a parent had heard about it and went off saying that if they were going to talk about it then she was going to pull her kid out of the class that day!” Ellen scoffed at the woman’s protest because her own children would have become truants if she had pulled them out of school each time Christian teachings were on the agenda. “If I reacted that way for the entire month of December because of Christmas—can you imagine?” Exasperated, she threw her hands up saying, “Oh, and then Easter! Can you imagine?”

Other Jewish families similarly remarked upon how little their Christian neighbors seemed to know about Judaism and regretted having to explain themselves to people who took the South’s Bible Belt culture for granted. “If anything, our kids were seen as oddities here,” explained one Jewish father of three, “like strange oddities.” He recalled participating in awkward conversations in which Christian neighbors seemed to be confused about his family’s customs:

People say things like, “You don’t celebrate Christmas? What’s up with that?” And really it’s not so much out of meanness but this complete lack of knowledge. Ignorance in a way, just a lack of knowledge. “What do you mean you guys don’t do Christmas? Why not?”

Another man, this one an Orthodox Jew, felt awkward when his kippah attracted unwanted attention from curious and confused onlookers. "If I'm in the Atlanta area, closer in to the city, I will wear it freely out and I don't feel any intimidation or any pressure by the experience at all, but not in Conyers. I just get weird looks when I have it on." Beyond the weird looks, he also sometimes encountered uncomfortable questions. "I've had people come up to me and say, 'Are you a Jew?' and I say, 'Yes.' And they say, 'Well, why don't you believe in God?'" He paused and widened his eyes as if to emphasize the ridiculousness of the question. "How do you answer something like that," I asked. The man chuckled and explained, "I say, 'Well, actually, we were the first kids on the block, in that regard.'"

Ignorance about Rockdale's minority religious groups was also a problem for Catholics who found that some local Protestants and Evangelicals did not even consider them to be Christian. One Methodist woman recalled that when she got engaged to marry her long-time Catholic boyfriend, an aunt tried to convince her not to go through with the wedding. "You know she was just telling me all this stuff about how Catholics are sort of in a cult," the woman explained. "Like they aren't really Christians the way Methodists and Baptists are because they pray to Mary and have saints and everything. She said that they have idols and do not put their full faith in Jesus. She said they probably do not actually go to heaven." Likewise, a Baptist couple whose adult son converted to Catholicism in preparation for his marriage to a Catholic woman reportedly took caution when explaining his choice to friends from church. "There's some in our Sunday school class who would be very, very upset if that was their child," explained the mother. "If somebody asked me about it I wouldn't change the story and tell a lie, but I don't offer that information up to just anybody."

Local Catholics for their part similarly understood themselves to occupy a somewhat marginalized position among Rockdale's Protestant mainstream. "A lot of fundamentalist Christians do not like Catholics. To this day. So I think being Catholic is a black mark here," explained one such man. "And incidentally, there's only one Catholic church in this whole county. But there are hundreds of Protestant churches." That Catholics were the group to test the limits of religious pluralism in Rockdale emphasized just how difficult things could be for non-Christian

people of faith, including Jews who often felt completely out of place in the community. One Jewish woman agreed that Catholics sometimes had a hard time in Rockdale before emphasizing that Jews had it much worse. “Yeah so they only have one Catholic church which isn’t much,” she admitted, “but at least they have something—I have to drive all the way to Atlanta because there is not a single synagogue here.”

Catholics and Jews might have wished their numbers in Rockdale were larger, but their real concern had to do with being viewed as potential converts to mainstream Christian denominations. In other words, it was not just that their beliefs went misunderstood and their customs went unacknowledged, it was that Evangelicals and Protestants seemed intent on proselytizing them which contributed to their impression of Christian hospitality as a somewhat superficial practice. For example, one Jewish man explained his reservations about mission projects in which Evangelicals appear to exchange cheerful service work for religious conversions among those they serve:

I do admire Christian people who do ministry work and mission work, because I have a lot of friends who go to Haiti. I admire that Christian imperative to go help. What I always struggle with though is “We’re going to go help at the price of your own culture. You have to do what we do.” It’s like, oh it’s really not for free. It’s really not for free is it?

He explained how Jews similarly contribute to humanitarian aid and other “good causes” but without pressuring anyone to accept a new religious worldview. “You know, the thing about Jews is they will never try to convert you,” he said.

Another Jewish man reportedly hesitated to accept church invitations because even though he imagined finding it interesting and enriching to observe rituals from another faith tradition, he could not trust that a Christian congregation would treat his own beliefs with equal respect. “In Judaism, we don’t believe that you have to be Jewish, obviously, to be in right standing with God. That concept is totally not part of our worldview.” In contrast, he understood Evangelicals to be focused on convincing people of their need for “a relationship with Jesus Christ,” and it was this emphasis on conversion which made him uncomfortable. “For me, God doesn’t want everyone to be Jewish, obviously, and he already has a relationship with the whole

world.” Catholics had similar cause for concern, especially given how often Protestants seemed to think they needed “saving.” One Catholic woman for example attended an outdoor church revival where a Baptist minister performed an impassioned altar call especially for Catholics. “He said, ‘All you have to do is admit your sinful ways and ask Jesus into your heart.’ I was like, does he not know that Catholics are already going to heaven? We already got Jesus. We’re good.” Given their unease about the possibility of being proselytized, religious minorities like these couldn’t help but view the hospitality of their Evangelical/Protestant neighbors with a healthy dose of skepticism.

The Hurt of a Friend’s Betrayal

The practice of superficial hospitality had conversion as its main objective, and some religious minorities experienced significant pain and sorrow when they sensed that trusted Evangelical/Protestant friends were willing to abandon them over their religious differences. Kayla McAfee, a Presbyterian who had married a Catholic man, described one such incident involving a local nondenominational church. For about a year she had attended a Sunday school class there while her husband attended Mass with his parents in a neighboring county. “We agreed to that when we got married,” she explained, “that it would be okay for us not to do church together since we have different backgrounds.” Having developed close friendships with several of the women in her class, she was surprised when they began to harass her with questions about her husband’s whereabouts:

Basically the Sunday school teacher started questioning me about my husband being Catholic and why he didn’t come with me to church. Then other wives that were in my Sunday school class would come up to me and say, “Doesn’t it make you feel bad that your husband doesn’t come with you to church?” And I was like, “No. Why should it? He goes to his church. Why should that make me feel bad?” “Well, we do everything together as a family, and that just is what God says you’re supposed to do.”

Just when she thought things couldn’t get any worse, the teacher surprised her one morning with a group lesson on Catholicism:

The whole class was talking about how Catholics aren't Christians—knowing that I was married to a Catholic. He said Catholics aren't Christian because they pray to Mother Mary or whatever and because they confess their sins to a priest and they think you can do a bunch of Hail Mary's and you're forgiven of your sins.

Kayla kept thinking that a friend in the class would intervene on her behalf, but no one said anything. Realizing that none of her friends could be counted on when she needed them most, she became overwhelmed with emotion. "I was probably red from my head to my feet because I was angry, embarrassed, humiliated," she recalled. "All my so-called friends that knew me in there were just looking at me like, 'Oh, my gosh.' Not one of them defended the Catholics or defended me for being married to a Catholic. Nothing. And of course I'm not friends with any of them now."

Ellen Baker, the Jewish woman from California who volunteered at her children's school, similarly came to believe that many of the Evangelical/Protestant friends she had made over the years were not truly devoted to the idea of nurturing a long-term relationship. Instead, she sensed that her disinterest in accompanying Christians to church had caused them to see her as unworthy of inclusion in their tight-knit social networks. "This area here doesn't feel inclusive at all. I've lived here eight years, and I still don't feel like I have a community." She went on to explain how despite her best efforts, the central importance of church life in Rockdale had caused her to feel like she was on the outside looking in:

One of the first things you do when you move to a new place is you try and get involved in things. Well, I obviously wasn't going to get involved in a church so I got involved in the school for a couple of reasons. One, for my kids, and two, to meet people. And I was meeting people and we were doing things with other families. But as the kids got older, that was the only thing we had in common with these families because we didn't go to church. So all those people we had called friends kind of fell away. Although we still have those connections, it's no deeper than that, you know? That's why we want to move when my younger one graduates because these people that I thought I was creating friendships with—I can't even have a conversation with them anymore because they don't want to go any further than whatever our kids were doing together. It's like they don't want to have a deeper friendship because they know I don't believe what they believe and they know that won't change.

Ellen said that the only close friends she had in Rockdale were a couple of other Jewish women who could relate to what she had been through over the years. “We connect in that way,” she explained, “because we have the same experiences here.”

In reflecting on Rockdale’s reputation for Southern hospitality, Ellen seemed conflicted because she could not deny that the people she had met in Georgia had a certain charm compared to those in her native California. “People kept telling me when we moved down here, ‘You’re going to *love* the Southern hospitality,’” she recalled, “and I was pleasantly surprised by how very helpful everybody was when we moved, like when I called the various utility companies, and when we actually moved in, the kids just went out to meet people in the neighborhood and it was fine. They were welcomed into people’s homes and everything.” Ellen took a deep breath and looked up as if thinking carefully about how to articulate her next point:

People are friendly up front, but only until a certain point. It’s almost this superficial friendliness. They’re friendly and welcoming until a certain point. So I felt like I had made all these friends, but it had never really gone any further than that. I just don’t feel like people here are that welcoming unless you think like them, and for me, I just feel like you don’t have to think like me to be welcoming. You just have to be welcoming.

For Ellen and others like her, the myth of Southern hospitality continued to be made real through social practices making it difficult to achieve any lasting sense of belonging in Rockdale. And given its function as a mechanism of inequality, the practice of Southern hospitality served to maintain rather than overcome the marginalized status of religious minorities in the community.

CONCLUSION

Is Southern hospitality real, or is it simply a myth? The purpose of my dissertation has been to explore this seemingly impenetrable question by taking a close look at how residents of one local community understood themselves to be hospitable people living in a hospitable place. In focusing on the routines and rituals of daily life in Rockdale, I've argued that community members embodied the tradition of Southern hospitality through specific styles of interaction believed to be emblematic of the South's unique history and culture. In Rockdale, Southern hospitality was more than a romantic notion gesturing to the past; it was a contemporary culture through which residents coped with change and determined who did and did not belong in their community.

That the origins of Southern hospitality have been lost to time apparently mattered very little, if at all, because images of the hospitable South are durable, adaptable, and able to withstand significant cultural change. While Southern society witnessed profound social, political, economic, and demographic transformation, outdated rituals and customs were simply replaced with new traditions symbolizing the same idea of Southern exceptionalism. The region will undoubtedly continue to change in the future as well, and the hospitable South will likely be reimagined again and again as the myth of Southern hospitality continues to be made real through the daily lives of contemporary Southerners. To summarize my findings then, one might simply say that the culture of Southern hospitality is characterized by change as well as persistence in spite of change.

The theoretical framework enabling me to explain how Rockdale's residents experienced Southern hospitality as a very real phenomenon is the distinction between discourse and practice. Other scholars have found this distinction to be useful for examining various discursive strategies used to portray the region as warm and inviting, but embodied behaviors which might also signify on the South's legendary reputation for hospitality have received less attention. For example, skillful analyses of the South's hospitality industry reveal how governments and businesses use whitewashed images of antebellum society to promote tourism in the contemporary South, but

these studies fail to shed light on how interactions between travelers and service-providers themselves may similarly allude to romanticized versions of Southern history. To be fair, it is perhaps inevitable for scholars like these to conclude that Southern hospitality is little more than a social fiction providing advertisers with rhetorical content for travel magazines and dinner menus. Discourse analysis is after all unlikely to produce evidence of the *practice* of Southern hospitality. But my approach has been to use participant observation, interviews, and other qualitative research methods to show that Southern hospitality is more than mere discourse. My analysis reveals that while Rockdale's residents drew on the discourse of Southern hospitality to articulate a sense of regional distinctiveness, they also translated that discourse into observable, embodied practices within their local community.

I've argued that the practice of Southern hospitality in Rockdale is best understood as a form of lived religion through which local Christians attended to the institutional maintenance of their congregations. Drawing on the elective affinity between Southern hospitality and Christian hospitality, members of the community's religious establishment effectively impressed first-time visitors and attracted new members with ritual displays of friendly, charming manners. But I also found that Rockdale's biracial Evangelical/Protestant majority employed practices like conditional hospitality, limited hospitality, and superficial hospitality which ultimately led to the marginalization of various sexual, racial-ethnic, and religious minorities. Thus, mainstream Christians and their associated organizations played a key role in determining whether specific types of people felt included or excluded, accepted or rejected, in the daily life of the community.

Those who enjoyed the greatest sense of belonging were non-Hispanic black and white Christians, especially those who employed the practice of hospitality to work toward racial reconciliation. This finding is indicative of the degree to which the culture of Southern hospitality has changed over time. During the antebellum period, the practice of Southern hospitality functioned to maintain an important social boundary between whites who were free and blacks who were enslaved, and the exploitation of slave labor not only made antebellum hospitality rituals possible but, more importantly, symbolized the high status of the white planter class. In Rockdale however, I found that black and white residents *both* enjoyed the privilege of playing

host and even leveraged their common understanding of Southern history and culture to work toward racial reconciliation. Whereas the culture of Southern hospitality once subjugated black Southerners to the lowest possible social status, contemporary hospitality rituals in Rockdale were used to establish biracial networks of reciprocity among black and white residents alike.

One important implication of this finding is that black Southerners in Rockdale who formerly would have been the target of exclusion and ridicule took an active role in defending the South's reputation for genteel hospitality. In other words, it appears that at least some black Southerners had adopted a sense of regional pride not unlike that of their white counterparts. Part of this trend can be explained by the pride black Southerners associated with the Abolitionist Movement, Civil Rights Movement, and other accomplishments which were achieved in spite of significant challenges posed by white Southerners. But Rockdale's black community members also seemed to associate pride with the same romanticized notion of genteel society which inspired their white neighbors. Indeed, black and white residents similarly gestured toward the same time-honored tradition of Southern hospitality, and instead of critically assessing images of the hospitable South, Rockdale's black residents used their familiarity with those same images to stage biracial hospitality rituals aimed at achieving black-white racial reconciliation. In doing so, they effectively laid claim to their own sense of regional pride in the South's reputation for gracious manners and warm welcomes.

Another significant change is that hospitality rituals were no longer reserved for high-class elites. Whereas antebellum planter families differentiated themselves from poor yeoman farmers by hosting lavish events, credible displays of Southern hospitality no longer required grand homes, luxury furnishings, or slave service. Even though practical limitations associated with contemporary middle- and working-class living conditions may have precluded the sorts of lengthy visits and long guest-lists which were typical among antebellum planter families, large swaths of the population in Rockdale were able to host family and friends for meals, parties, and other social events due to the relative spaciousness and affordability of suburban homes. At the same time, being able to host surprise visitors and unexpected guests was no longer a concern

given that modern amenities like hotels and restaurants accommodated contemporary travelers to the South.

I've argued that while the culture of hospitality has become more inclusive over time, it also continues to function as a mechanism of inequality. Hospitality rituals in Rockdale resulted in the exclusion of various minorities who therefore struggled to achieve any sense of belonging in their local community, and LGBTQ folks, Hispanic/Latino immigrants, and Jews and Catholics often concluded that the hospitable South is a generally unwelcoming and hostile place to live. For groups like these, Southern hospitality came to be seen as a myth because not everyone received the same warm welcome. In other words, even those who were least likely to feel at home in Rockdale did not dispute that Southern hospitality is a very real and embodied practice—they simply experienced the hypocrisy of their community's discriminating ways and regretted not being included in hospitality rituals on equal terms as Rockdale's black-white Christian majority.

I've shown that while the set of rituals symbolizing Southern hospitality has changed significantly over time, the idea of a distinctively hospitable Southern region has been maintained. It is likely however that the practice of hospitality varies across space as well as time, and I in no way mean to suggest that the politics of belonging in Rockdale should be held up as representative of the entire Southern region. In Rockdale, it is likely that the rise of a black majority coupled with the community's proximity to Atlanta—a city renowned for its prominent black leaders—contributed to the success of black-white hospitality rituals and racial reconciliation. Likewise, other communities in the South feature longer histories of LGBTQ advocacy as well as more diverse religious and racial-ethnic populations—characteristics which could provide minorities like these with greater chances of feeling at home in the South. Instead of imagining any one monolithic South then, I would argue that it is crucial to acknowledge multiple Souths in which local trends contribute to a variety of discourses and practices.

The generalizable portion of my thesis is that the culture of Southern hospitality can help to explain how residents of a given Southern place determine who does and does not belong in their community. Who is included? Who is excluded? Who is truly welcome here? Answers to these questions will undoubtedly vary from one place to another, but what all Southern

communities likely share in common is an appreciation for what it means to be part of The Hospitable South.

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