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All Are Welcome? Southern Hospitality and the Politics of Belonging

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STUDY *the* SOUTH

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1 INTRODUCTION

In March 2016, Georgia governor Nathan Deal urged his fellow Republicans, who controlled both chambers of the state legislature, to "recognize that the world is changing around us."[1] The Supreme Court of the United States had recently ruled that same-sex couples have a constitutional right to marry, a decision that reflected growing acceptance of homosexuality nationwide, and conservatives in Georgia were responding with a religious liberty bill that would allow faith-based organizations to cite their "sincerely held religious beliefs" in refusing services to gay and lesbian people, and in firing employees who hold opposing views on the matter. The governor, however, was not on board.

Deal stood in the lobby of a government building, and after reminding listeners that he is a Southern Baptist who studied religion at Mercer University, went on to provide a Biblical basis for condemning the bill, despite his own personal belief in "traditional marriage" between a man and woman:

> What the New Testament teaches us is that Jesus reached out to those who were considered the outcasts, the ones that did not conform to the religious societies' view of the world. [. . .] We do not have a belief in my way of looking at religion that says we have to discriminate against anybody. If you were to apply those standards to the teaching of Jesus, I don't think they fit. [. . .] We are not jeopardized, in my opinion, by those who believe differently from us. [. . .] I do not feel threatened by the fact that people who might choose same-sex marriages pursue that route. [. . .] I hope that we

> can all just take a deep breath, recognize that the world is changing around us, and recognize that it is important that we protect fundamental religious beliefs. But we don't have to discriminate against other people in order to do that. And that's the compromise that I'm looking for.[2]

News reporters were later provided with the following comment from House Speaker David Ralston's office:

> Speaker Ralston appreciates and shares Governor Deal's sincere commitment to protecting religious liberties while ensuring that Georgia continues to welcome everyone with genuine southern hospitality. Productive conversations continue with the Governor's staff as well as other members of House leadership regarding HB 757 and the Speaker is confident that we can find a way to move forward together.[3]

Days later the governor held a press conference to announce he was vetoing the bill, and his remarks echoed Ralston's reference to southern hospitality. Deal described Georgia's reputation for "warm, friendly, and loving people" who "work side by side without regard to the color of our skin, or the religion we adhere to." "That is the character of Georgia," he insisted. "I intend to do my part to keep it that way."[4]

As a political discourse, this argument justifies a particular response to change by invoking the culture of southern hospitality—an idea so ubiquitous that it spans from the hallowed halls of Georgia's state capitol to the party planning tips in *Southern Living* magazine. In this instance, the image of a warm and welcoming South is summoned as a moral calling, a sacred duty to bridge differences by treating others hospitably. Southern regional identity is positioned as having equal importance to that of Christian religious identity, and the entire argument hinges on devotion to Christian teachings just as well as reverence for southern tradition.

Southern hospitality is often used as little more than a sales gimmick, but the ease with which politicians like Deal and Ralston elevate the concept to frame moral debates is explained in part by the elective affinity between southern hospitality and Christian hospitality. Social theorist Max Weber used the concept of elective affinity to describe the cultural congruence between Protestantism and capitalism,[5] and a similar mutuality characterizes the relationship between southern hospitality and Christian hospitality. The image of a gracious southern hostess shares a certain coherence with that of a neighborly Christian, and the notion of hospitality resonates with both regional and religious dimensions of identity for many Christians in the South.

While changes like the legalization of same-sex marriage involve government leaders in identity politics at the macro level, ordinary Americans experience the impact of these same events in their immediate surroundings. And just as it provided a basis for Governor Deal's veto of HB

757, the elective affinity between southern hospitality and Christian hospitality functions as a moral framework for negotiating change and debating identity politics in local communities as well. This is what I observed in Rockdale County, Georgia, between 2014 and 2017 when I spent two and a half years there conducting an ethnographic community study focused on the discourse and practice of southern hospitality.

Rockdale is located about half an hour east of downtown Atlanta and has witnessed several decades of social, political, and cultural change. Rockdale's only city, Conyers, was incorporated in 1854 and originally functioned as a watering post along the rail line connecting Atlanta to Augusta. The small, rural community of predominantly white farmers and cotton-mill workers was eventually integrated into the Metro Atlanta area by the installation of Interstate 20 during the 1960s and subsequently witnessed drastic population growth and suburban residential and commercial development.[6]

More recently, Rockdale's population has not only continued to grow but also to diversify. In 2000, non-Hispanic whites made up 73 percent of Rockdale's population, but by 2013 that figure had declined to only 38 percent.[7] This dramatic transformation is explained by the addition of numerous black transplants, including those who moved to the South from other regions, in a trend dubbed the "New Great Migration;"[8] the arrival of Hispanic/Latino newcomers who have transformed the community into one of the South's new immigrant destinations;[9] and the loss of approximately 18,000 non-Hispanic white residents[10]—a pattern many locals describe as "white flight."[11] By the time I began collecting data, Rockdale's population of nearly 88,000 featured a black majority of 52 percent,[12] and 10 percent identified as Hispanic or Latino.[13] Non-Hispanic whites made up only 36 percent.[14] These demographic changes broadly introduced new forms of cultural diversity to the community as its political landscape shifted left along racial lines. Rockdale's first black county commissioners were elected in 2008, in lockstep with President Barack Obama's history-making win, and a "Slate of Eight" black Democrats ran against white Republicans to win most of the county government positions in 2012.

To collect my data, I conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork with formal groups including government agencies, nonprofit organizations, small businesses, and churches as well as informal gatherings of neighboring families and friends in restaurants, coffee shops, and private residences. Because organized religion emerged as a major theme in understanding the local culture of southern hospitality, I focused a significant portion of my fieldwork on church worship services, Bible study meetings, fellowship get-togethers, fundraisers, service projects, and holiday celebrations hosted by local Christian congregations. In addition to participant observation and casual conversation, I conducted formal, semi-structured, and digitally recorded interviews with sixty 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 nonreligious families. Among these sixty formal interviewees were individuals from about thirty households who also allowed me to shadow their daily lives by accompanying them during routine activities like going to work, spending time with family, and participating in community events. Residents of Rockdale treated me as either an insider or outsider depending on the context of a given interaction, but all types of people tended to treat me hospitably. My ability to build rapport with participants was likely made easier by the privileges associated with my identity as a white, middle-class, US-born, cisgender, heterosexual woman. I also benefitted from the familiarity with Metro Atlanta I had acquired

through family members with local connections as well as my own experiences attending a local college.[15]

What I found is that for Rockdale's non-Hispanic black and white Christians, the majority group who occupy countless positions of power and influence, hospitality is 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 construct reciprocal patterns of hospitality aimed at achieving black-white racial reconciliation. At the same time however, this group also comes under scrutiny for their inhospitable or even hostile treatment of others, including sexual, racial-ethnic, and religious minorities. Rockdale's southern hospitality may be aimed at improving upon the South's reputation for antiblack racism, but it ultimately functions to exclude minorities and maintain their marginalized status in the community. Placed in historical perspective, these findings reveal that despite the New South's eclipsing of the Old, the politics of belonging in southern communities continues to be determined in large part by the practice of southern hospitality.

2 HOSPITALITY IN THE OLD SOUTH, THE NEW SOUTH, AND BEYOND

The origins of southern hospitality can be found among the now-antiquated social practices of the antebellum planter class, for whom visiting in the homes of aunts, uncles, and cousins was a primary means of maintaining relationships with extended kin. Ceremonial events like weddings, funerals, and graduations often involved the prolonged stay of many relatives at a time,[16] and it was also common to arrange for cousins to spend long periods of time in each other's homes for no other reason than to nurture close relationships among them. Given that it was often a dear cousin who became one's business partner or spouse in life, families made strategic use of hospitality to "surveil" their extended relatives.[17]

Visiting a planter family's home was considered "a privilege to be exercised by anyone with the 'same blood in their veins,'"[18] but the practice of southern hospitality also included welcoming neighbors, friends, and even strangers. In light of the South's "spartan facilities for public transportation, food, and lodging,"[19] genteel families living in grand homes often provided accommodation to wealthy travelers—both familiar and strange—who made their way across the region. Plantation homes therefore were not simply family residences but crucial spaces for mixing and mingling, and by regularly hosting various members of high society "the social standing of the head of the household was demonstrated in various rituals of hospitality."[20]

The grandeur and sophistication of plantation homes along with their many luxury accoutrements symbolized the wealth and power planter families wielded in their local communities. In letters written to family and friends between 1827 and 1833, for example, Florida plantation mistress Laura Wirt Randall described dazzling guests with the finest china, crystal, and furniture all sourced from Washington, DC and Baltimore by her mother.[21] 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 produced elaborate meals consumed by wealthy planters, just as it was slaves who cleaned houses, cared for horses, minded children, tended fires, and waited on guests. Women like Laura merely planned the events and then ordered their slaves to complete the necessary household tasks.[22] As southern literature scholar Anthony Szczesiul explains, "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]

Southern hospitality's dependence on the exploitation of slave labor contributed to the exclusivity of the planter class by maintaining two important social boundaries[24]—that between black slaves and white masters, and that between wealthy planters and poor yeomen farmers. The service that masters demanded of their 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. Because elites extended warm welcomes only to those of equal status, "reciprocal patterns of hospitality bound together the great planters."[25]

The South's antebellum plantation society was irreparably altered by the Civil War and Reconstruction, and subsequent sociopolitical upheavals like the Jim Crow era and the civil rights movement continued to transform the structure of social life in the South. Given these changes, some argue that southern hospitality today is not so much a practice as a discourse, one that 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 that made genteel hospitality possible. "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," explains Szczesiul, "while forgetting that the historical origins of southern hospitality (its founding events) lie in an economy of slave labor."[26] By gesturing toward a romanticized version of past events, the postbellum discourse of southern hospitality conjures up images of an antebellum South that is dignified and charming as opposed to violent and racist.[27]

The discursive strategy used to promote tourism and business in the New South for example has frequently employed southern hospitality as "a free-floating nostalgic image, an effective

commercial concept, and a consumer commodity."[28] The city of Atlanta was promoted early in the twentieth century for "its transportation connections, its growing importance as a regional commercial center, and its warm southern hospitality,"[29] and later during desegregation as "The City Too Busy to Hate."[30] Atlanta-based Delta Airlines meanwhile adopted the slogan "Hospitality and Service from the Heart"[31] and advertised a special "Plantation Breakfast" as part of new service routes bringing "the warmth of southern hospitality to the skies of New York."[32]

The postbellum discourse of southern hospitality certainly perpetuates romanticized images of the antebellum planter class, but we should not lose sight of the fact that southerners have continued to *practice* hospitality through observable, embodied behaviors as well. In her landmark study of jobs that require "emotional labor," sociologist Arlie Hochschild found that Delta flight attendants were trained to treat airplane cabins like their own living rooms, as their "emotional memories of offering personal hospitality were called up and put to use,"[33] and according to geographer Drew Whitelegg they were expected "to think of passengers as visiting guests."[34] It was, after all, customer service that 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 explained, "[and] every employee has the power to destroy or uphold that tradition for courtesy and real hospitality."[35] Translating the discourse of genuine, heartfelt hospitality into particular styles of interaction with customers would have required flight attendants to recognize what it meant to perform southern hospitality, not just talk about it. "At thirty-five thousand feet," Whitelegg asserts, "they *embodied* southern hospitality, with its stress on home, family, and womanhood."[36]

Many scholars of the South defend the notion that contemporary southerners continue to display distinctively hospitable behavior, despite producing little more than colorful anecdotes as evidence. In the widely acclaimed *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, for example, historian Joe Taylor argued 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.[37] He went on to say that even if "the circumstances of southern hospitality have changed, the spirit remains the same. [. . .] 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."[38] Understanding exactly *how* these circumstances have changed requires us to do more than simply insist that southern hospitality is "real"—it requires us to examine the lives of real southerners in the flesh. And while research on companies like Delta Airlines may shed light on the commodification of southern hospitality, important questions remain regarding the practice of southern hospitality in local communities.

Is southern hospitality in this context 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? Or has southern hospitality evolved into some new set of rituals—rituals that bear little resemblance to those practiced by the antebellum planter class but nonetheless continue to symbolize the concept of a distinctive southern region? If so, what are the consequences of these new rituals? In what ways does the practice of southern hospitality reinforce or diminish social inequality in contemporary southern communities?

My findings in Rockdale show that contemporary southern hospitality is indeed more than a myth—it is a set of practices through which families continue to negotiate the politics of belonging in their local communities. The culture of southern hospitality may take on mythic proportions, but it is also embodied in the lives of real people who perform its rituals and experience its consequences. To explain how residents of Rockdale understand 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, we can carefully trace how the South's legacy of genteel hospitality corresponds to its popular reputation as the "Bible Belt."

3 HOSPITALITY IN ROCKDALE

One way in which the elective affinity between Christian hospitality and southern hospitality revealed itself in Rockdale was through the regularity with which local clergy spoke of both concepts in the same breath. During a guest sermon at Trinity Baptist Church for example, Pastor Liz Coates compared the hospitality practiced by early followers of Jesus to that of contemporary southerners:

> 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. [. . .] 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?

In drawing a parallel between the two, Pastor Liz suggested that southern hospitality shares in the moral virtue associated with Christian hospitality. Pastor David Armstrong-Reiner of Epiphany Lutheran Church similarly leveraged the image of hospitable southerners to remind Christians of their ethical obligation to welcome strangers. In response to a growing controversy over plans for a Muslim mosque and cemetery to be developed in neighboring Newton County, he published an essay in the local newspaper that made appeals to his readers as Christians as well as southerners. "I call upon us as believers in Jesus to welcome these Muslim brothers and sisters into our community," he wrote. "I call upon us to show the same southern hospitality that any other newcomer would receive."[39]

The majority group in Rockdale consisted of non-Hispanic black and white Christians who share a common familiarity with the elective affinity between southern hospitality and Christian hospitality. Many who are native southerners for example told similar childhood stories of having traditionally practiced hospitality with their families and friends on Sunday, the Lord's Day. 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." 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. Y'all come on over." They would almost make you come. "Y'all 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 that 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 that 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 remembered that his mother routinely spent Sunday afternoons graciously feeding surprise visitors, even when 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!"

This shared familiarity with hospitality, religiosity, and southern culture formed a basis on which Rockdale's non-Hispanic black and white Christians negotiated the politics of race relations in their community, and one key component of this endeavor was addressing the South's legacy of antiblack racism. Many older residents I spoke to reflected on their younger years when it was standard practice for white families and white churches to exclude their black neighbors from hospitality rituals in the community, and some white residents even discussed their own participation in racist practices.

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 community members similarly admitted to having treated their black neighbors with insufficient hospitality in the past. Anne Murphy, for example, an older white woman who had spent most of her life in Rockdale, described what it was like in the 1970s, 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."

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 remembered that First Baptist Church of Madison, located in a neighboring county, had once refused accommodation to two women visiting all the way from a mission field in Africa simply on account of their being black. Despite recent decades of progress, the ongoing de facto segregation of black and white churches 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."

Several of Rockdale's black and white pastors were known for addressing this issue by hosting special events focused on religion and race relations, thereby utilizing the practice of hospitality to foster biracial unity. Pastor Layne Fields for example, a middle-aged black man who led the historic black congregation at Old Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, worked closely with his colleague Pastor Joe LaGuardia, a middle-aged white man who led the somewhat diverse but mostly white congregation at Trinity Baptist Church located just across the street. Over the course of several months, the pair cosponsored a series of events to address black-white race relations with their respective congregations.

The highlight was a joint worship service hosted by Old Pleasant Hill that included a special anthem performed by the combined choirs and a co-preached sermon in which Pastor Layne and Pastor Joe professed that the anointing power of the Holy Spirit unites black and white Christians together under a common cause. At the conclusion of the service, Pastor Layne reminded his congregants to be good hosts and 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 black woman as she held my white hand in a gentle embrace. "You are welcome here any Sunday, sweetheart.

It was Trinity's turn to play host next, and Pastor Layne accepted an invitation to participate in a Wednesday night Bible study discussion on race relations in Rockdale. Pastor Joe brought up the South's history of racialized violence, and 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 positive, the church's elders reportedly struggled to move past the discrimination and segregation that had

characterized their childhoods. “There are two versions of Conyers,” Pastor Layne explained. “The Old Conyers and the New Conyers.”

Several weeks later, Pastor Joe picked up the theme again by discussing Black Lives Matter with members of the same Bible study group at Trinity. He illustrated the significance of structural racism by summarizing black-white disparities in inherited wealth and access to healthcare before stating plainly, “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 discussing how to work toward racial reconciliation, 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.”

Pastor Layne and Pastor Joe leveraged the practice of hospitality to create a biracial network of reciprocity while also urging their congregants to use hospitality rituals themselves as a way of working toward racial reconciliation in the community. But while church leaders like these promoted biracial unity by organizing occasional cosponsored 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.[40] After having shared building facilities for several years, the black minister Pastor Moses Little reported that God had 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.’” 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 nurturing biracial 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 used hospitality to nurture a sense of mutual belonging among the community's non-Hispanic black and white Christians.

Joint efforts to achieve black-white racial reconciliation reveal how the practice of hospitality can be used to strategically include others and overcome difference, but I found that hospitality also functioned to exclude others and emphasize difference as well. When it came to the topic of sexual minorities, many Christians practiced *conditional hospitality* in order to symbolize their unwillingness to accept behaviors they believe to be sinful. 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.

Kicking the Boy Scouts off their property created somewhat of a scandal, and Atlanta's ABC affiliate WSB-TV broadcasted live coverage from Rockdale during an evening news segment on the controversial decision.[41] I sat down with Pastor Craig Beall to ask 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 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 eviction had caused any conflict among his parishioners, 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."

I persisted by asking 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 conditional hospitality to

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

LGBTQ community members and their allies were often required to meet certain criteria in order to receive warm welcomes at local congregations, 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 named Allie Brown resided at a nearby group home because her Christian father had told her that she was no longer welcome in his house. During a heated argument, he had insisted that Allie's homosexuality could negatively influence her younger siblings. When I asked her to describe the living conditions at her group home 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."

Other times it was a family's willingness to welcome their LGBTQ kin that resulted in rejection at church. One older man recalled that his "staunch Baptist" neighbor had been completely shunned by her pastor after taking in her adult gay son who was suffering from complications due to HIV/AIDS:

> 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."

Because of the conditions so many Christians placed on the practice of hospitality, LGBTQ community members could not depend on receiving a warm welcome in Rockdale and frequently encountered exclusion and rejection instead.

In a similar practice, Rockdale's non-Hispanic black-white Christian majority extended *limited hospitality* to their Latino neighbors by welcoming them to participate in church activities but also segregating them on the basis of real or imagined differences in English-language skills. Elena Cortes for example, a Latina woman originally from Miami, recalled visiting St. Pius X Catholic Church with her family one morning only to be greeted by a white man who said, "Oh you know the Spanish service is later. You got here early." Elena explained that her family spoke English, but the man responded "Okay that's fine. But you might prefer the Spanish service anyway. You might like it better." Explaining to me how the interaction made her feel, Elena

said, “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 Spanish service and described it 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 English service seemed to highlight the fact that 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 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 all of the mixed-race groupings I saw appeared to include only non-Hispanic black and white people. I casually observed to one of St. Pius’s white members that the Latino families did not 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!” For the woman to imagine two separate Masses, one for “them” and one for “us,” represented a stark contrast to the widespread belief that Rockdale’s non-Hispanic black and white Christians belong together as a unified body of believers. I asked if she considered any of her church’s 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 as First Baptist Church sponsored a Hispanic Baptist congregation. Iglesia Bautista Nueva Vida En Cristo was provided with meeting space in a building located about six miles from the church’s main campus, and one of First Baptist’s adult Sunday school classes additionally provided financial support as well as an annual luncheon. 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 interpret only 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 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 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 church members she had served lunch to, and 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 events.

Finally, members of Rockdale’s Christian religious establishment practiced *superficial hospitality* as they relied on kindness and cordiality to share their Christian faith with others but ultimately seemed more intent on proselytizing “nonbelievers” than cultivating the free exchange of ideas. Many religious minorities reported feeling as if local Christians viewed them as something like projects, people who could be worked on and gradually persuaded to convert to Christianity. One Jewish man, for example, described hesitating to accept church invitations because even though he imagined it would be interesting to observe rituals from another religious tradition, he could not trust that a Christian congregation would treat his own tradition 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 Christians to be focused on convincing people of their need for “a relationship with Jesus Christ,” and it was this emphasis on conversion that made him uncomfortable. “For me, God doesn’t want everyone to be Jewish, obviously, and he already has a relationship with the whole world.” Another Jewish man similarly explained his reservations about mission projects in which Christians 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.

A Jewish woman from California named Ellen Baker similarly came to believe that many of the Christian 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, southern hospitality felt like a superficial practice that prevented her from achieving any true sense of belonging in the community. As a mechanism of inequality, it ultimately functioned to maintain rather that overcome the marginalized status of religious minorities in Rockdale.

In Rockdale, southern hospitality is more than a romantic notion gesturing to the past; it is an ongoing set of practices through which residents cope with change and determine who does and does not belong in their community. Whereas antebellum hospitality subjugated black southerners to the lowest possible social status, in Rockdale I found that black and white

residents *both* enjoy the privilege of playing host and even leverage their common understanding of the elective affinity between southern hospitality and Christian hospitality to work toward racial reconciliation. This finding reflects not only the political restructuring of American society that was achieved through abolition and the civil rights movement, but also the trend in which black southerners have increasingly embraced their regional identities.[42] Indeed, the possibility of black southerners laying claim to the tradition of southern hospitality is now more likely given what sociologist Zandria Robinson describes as "black southerners' recent reclamation and less apologetic expression of a regionally marked blackness."[43]

Likewise, hospitality rituals are no longer reserved for high-class elites, and large swaths of the population take part in activities at home and at church that are understood to represent the South's reputation for charming, well-mannered hosts. Even though practical limitations associated with contemporary middle- and working-class living conditions may preclude the sorts of lengthy visits and long guest lists that were typical among antebellum planter families, many people in Rockdale are able to host family and friends for meals, parties, and other social events due to the relative spaciousness and affordability of suburban homes.

These changes indicate that southern hospitality has become more inclusive over time, but it also continues to function as a mechanism of inequality as well. The practice of hospitality in Rockdale results in the exclusion of various minorities who therefore struggle to achieve any sense of belonging in their local community, and LGBTQ folks, Hispanic/Latino immigrants, and Jewish residents often conclude that the hospitable South is a generally unwelcoming and hostile place to live. The culture of southern hospitality is therefore characterized by change as well as persistence in spite of change.

That the origins of antebellum practices have been lost to time apparently matters 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 political 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 myth of southern hospitality will continue to be made real as various types of people are either welcomed or neglected, brought into the fold or turned away.

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[10] US Census Bureau, "Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000," and US Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States, States, and Counties: April 1, 2010, to July 1, 2013." The Census Bureau counted 50,967 white alone, non-Hispanic residents in 2000 and estimated there to be 32,869 white alone, non-Hispanic residents in 2013, for a difference of 18,098.

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[12] US Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population: April 1, 2010, to July 1, 2014," and US Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race Alone, or in Combination, and Hispanic Origin for the United States, States, and Counties: April 1, 2010, to July 1, 2014." The Census Bureau estimated Rockdale's resident population to be 87,754 as of July 1, 2014. The Census Bureau estimated there to be 46,024 black residents as of July 1, 2014 (race alone or in combination, including both Hispanic and non-Hispanic).

[13] US Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States, States, and Counties: April 1, 2010, to July 1, 2014." The Census Bureau estimated there to be 8,806 Hispanic residents as of July 1, 2014.

[14] US Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States, States, and Counties: April 1, 2010, to July 1, 2014." The Census Bureau estimated there to be 31,978 non-Hispanic white residents as of July 1, 2014 (race alone).

[15] 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 regional 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 minister to recruit Hispanic/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 bilingual translator. 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 multimedia data on local community activity, including newspaper articles, websites, photographs, and social media exchanges. I used the software MAXQDA to qualitatively analyze all of this data 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 that might unintentionally identify them otherwise.

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[20] Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 301.
[21] Anya Jabour, "'The Privations & Hardships of a New Country': Southern Women and Southern Hospitality on the Florida Frontier," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (Winter 1997), 267.
[22] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
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[29] Harvey Newman, "Hospitality and Violence: Contradictions in a Southern City," *Urban Affairs Review* 35, no. 4 (March 2000), 545.
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[31] Delta Air Lines, "Delta Brand: Slogans," www.deltamuseum.org/exhibits/delta-history/delta-brand/slogans, accessed December 11, 2019.
[32] Delta Air Lines, "Delta Brings the Warmth of Southern Hospitality to the Skies of New York," https://airlineartifacts.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/delta-4-1-56-timetable-inside.jpg, accessed December 11, 2019.
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