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Disguised as Southern Hospitality and its Effects on Black Identity
in "Blues for Mister Charlie" and The Vanishing Half**

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Bless Your Heart: A Deconstruction of Southern Hostility Disguised as Southern Hospitality and
its Effects on Black Identity in “*Blues for Mister Charlie*” and *The Vanishing Half*

by

Sterling Neill

Under the Direction of Elizabeth West, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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ABSTRACT

Southern hospitality, whether real or perceived, is a cultural stereotype tied to the Southern region of the United States. Studies on Southern hospitality are growing, possibly due to the recent surge of anti-Black legislation including disbandment of Affirmative Action, critical race theory, and women and gender studies in schools. As more racist and sexist doctrine is dispersed throughout America, it is imperative to evaluate false narratives, such as Southern hospitality, that perpetuate and reinforce structural discrimination, which historical literary works can function to counter. This thesis examines *Blues for Mister Charlie* by James Baldwin and *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett, to divulge their perspectives on Southern hospitality's prompting of guise and performance, giving rise to what I term "Southern hostility." I posit that these works reveal the true American past, exposing performative allyship and victimhood by Whites and identity struggles for Blacks to critique issues surrounding race and identity.

INDEX WORDS: James Baldwin, Brit Bennett, Southern hospitality, Performance, Identity, Race

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2023

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December 2023

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Brit Bennett for opening my eyes to the absurdity of colorism and reminding me that multi-racial identity is something to be proud of. I also dedicate this work to my partner who constantly encourages me to do what I can while always suggesting that I do too much. Finally, I dedicate this work to my parents who instilled within me “do everything to your best ability or not at all”, and my best friend who always seems to be amazed and supportive, no matter what I do.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the grand theater of Southern culture, where sweet tea flows and front porch welcomes abound, there's an untold narrative lurking behind the inviting scenes of hospitality. Amid the theatricality there is an undercurrent of racism that shapes and influences social dynamics. This tension between Black and White relations is characterized by Griffin Matthews, a Black artist who starred in the third season of *Dear White People* and co-wrote the musical *Witness Uganda* (later retitled *Invisible Thread*), who on June 1, 2020, released an Instagram video titled "Broadway is racist" to describe how performative acts and hidden agendas persist not only regionally but also in broader cultural realms. In this video Matthews explains that he has interacted with people who disguise their true intentions of racism under the mask of ally or victim. I argue that it is imperative to picture Southern hospitality not as a heartfelt invitation, but as a tentatively crafted performance – the Southern stage where other acts like feigned allyship and victimhood take their cues, concealing a plot twist of ulterior motives.

To investigate the potential consequences of antagonistic intentions hidden behind the guise of hospitality, allyship, and victimhood, one must first recognize the stark contrast between Southern hospitality and its antithesis. I assert that the insincere or ill-intentioned antagonism hidden beneath acts of Southern hospitality aligns with Jacques Derrida's assertion that "hospitality is opposed to what is nothing other than opposition itself, namely, hostility" (4). These motives of disguised racism that exemplify Southern hostility are captured in African American literary works past and present and reveal that White individuals can perform hospitable gestures and act as ally or victim in attempts of concealing their antagonism. This paradoxical dynamic of hospitality, allyship, and victimhood used as a smokescreen for antagonism is thoughtfully explored in works such as *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964) by James

Baldwin and *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett. Baldwin's narrative dissects the façade of Southern hospitality, unraveling the layers of racial tensions and revealing the true intentions behind seemingly benevolent gestures. In Bennett's novel, the characters grapple with performative allyship and victimhood, shedding light on the consequences of such acts on societal constructs and personal identity. The examination will navigate the blurred lines between genuine intent and strategic, public posturing, offering insights into how these performances contribute to a perpetuation of Southern hostility. In a social landscape where even the politest gestures might be scripted, *Blues for Mister Charlie* and *The Vanishing Half* explore the realities behind the charm, revealing the true plot twists of Southern hostility that challenge the prevailing perceptions of the South.

1.1 Southern Hostility and the Performances of Hospitality, Allyship, and Victimhood

Through White performance of hospitality, allyship, and victimization, individuals are able to act as if they have good intentions for Black White relations yet conceal their true intentions of White solidarity and power perpetuation. Artists and scholars have collectively delved into the connection of hospitality and hostility, elucidating the intricate relationship that establishes the conditional privileges for Whites over Blacks. One such scholar, Heather Seferovich explains that hospitality in the South was often hindered by hostility, which typically was accompanied by bodily harm. She further suggests "the concept of honor explains how these two opposite extremes were able to coexist" (340). These coexisting extremes illustrate how some individuals may maintain a sense of honor through conforming to social customs like hospitality, yet instances of hostility arise as a reaction to perceived threats to one's honor. Social order and the notion of honor created the push and pull relationship between hospitality and hostility, enabling some White individuals the privilege to perform the act of ally or victim in hopes of gaining

social standing or sympathy in the eyes of those around them. The delicate balance between hospitality and hostility, when abused during the navigation of social hierarchy, is manifested through performative gestures that serve to conceal hostility.

In two different sociological studies Dov Cohen et al. observed the outcomes of violence between Northern and Southern subjects. The objective was to investigate whether cultural norms emphasizing politeness prompted violence in the U.S. South. To do this the participants were tested on sending and receiving signs of hostility. The researchers concluded that the interactions of White Southerners were propelled by social constructs of honor and politeness that ultimately lead to hastened escalation of violence in response to perceived hostility. Cohen et al. “suggest that norms for politeness can keep conflicts below the surface, masking underlying negative emotions and preventing parties from working out their differences before the situation has unfortunately gone too far” (258). In the context of racial dynamics, White performance of Southern hospitality or as I suggest Southern hostility enables Whites to solidify social standing and continue the perpetuation of racism, yet Black performance through acts of Southern hospitality often occurs under coercive circumstances. In other words, Black people often engage in performance and transformation not to fulfill intentions of upholding racial solidarity and power, but rather to conform to the White patriarchal social hierarchy. Conforming to a social hierarchy that restricts or altogether disregards the rights and needs of its members typically leads to challenges when it comes to shaping one’s identity. Restrictive social practices in relation to identity is explained by Thadious Davis who suggests that “Focusing on the social geography that makes exclusion and containment acceptable foregrounds the normalizing of restrictive social controls in order to produce a specific system of race-based identity and social relations in the South” (18). Through the examination of the consequences of constraining

societal and social practices, I assert that Southern hostility serves as the concealed underbelly of Southern hospitality. The perpetuation of Southern hostility veiled beneath ostensibly hospitable acts dictated by restrictive social constraints creates a challenging environment for Black individuals to navigate, limiting their opportunities for self-discovery, positive identity formation, and the authentic expression of their true selves. Southern hostility is the exposure of the true intentions of racism perpetuation behind the White performance that hinders Blacks from constructing affirming identities, which is displayed prominently in *Blues for Mister Charlie* and *The Vanishing Half*.

In *Blues for Mister Charlie*, the White character, Parnell, acts as ally to Black and White characters, but also as victim to suffering from the social construction of racism. While Parnell's actions may not be deemed as ill intended or malice, his complicity in the horrific actions of the White characters does not place him in the position of victim but rather as a Southern hostility accomplice. Parnell illustrates the paradoxical connection of White allyship to Black suffering: Whites may act as an ally to Black people while simultaneously fostering the discrimination and racist tendencies of a White patriarchal America. Due to Parnell's friendship with the father of the murder victim, Reverend Meridian Henry, and the murderer, Lyle, Parnell simultaneously takes on the role of ally and accomplice. As an ally Parnell propagates hospitality by cultivating a friendly, inclusive environment built on openness and communal connection, illustrated by his role in the murder's arrest and his outreaching gesture to inform the affected individuals. Although Parnell enacts Southern hospitality by fostering an inclusive environment built on mutual trust and respect, heightened by his written and vocal advocacy for social justice, his hospitable acts are tarnished by his role as accomplice. Despite actively speaking out against those who do not advocate for social equality, he maintains relationships with the individuals he

criticizes, solidifying his role as supposed ally, emphasizing unintentional perpetuation of discriminatory tendencies that are ingrained in the United States. While outwardly emphasizing the importance of a more hospitable and inclusive environment, Parnell's association with the murderer and other bigoted characters underscores the complexities of his feigned allyship. Parnell's relationships with Reverend Meridian and Lyle, limit his ability to genuinely practice Southern hospitality, as supporting one side would result in detriment to the other.

As the murderer and main antagonist of the story, Lyle uses hospitality to elevate his social standing and to pose as the victim. When Lyle first meets Richard, the murder victim, in public, he welcomes him, yet later in private he kills Richard for not giving him the respect he believes he deserves. In the initial encounter Lyle pretends to be kind to Richard to initiate his public perception as hospitable, although he casts himself as a victim after he murders Richard to incite sympathy for himself. Posing as the victim allows him to escape responsibility for the hostile actions he perpetuates. The behavior not only facilitates his evasion of consequences but also reinforces his ability to elevate his reputation through insincere displays of hospitality. Ultimately this pattern contributes to the development of an entitlement complex within him. Using insincere acts of Southern hospitality conceals the hostility, which exposed through Baldwin's analysis of White reputation, dishonesty, and entitlement.

Another example of a character that acts and eventually transforms into the role of supposed ally is Stella from Brit Bennett's 2020 novel, *The Vanishing Half*, which critiques the shades of Black/White designation in society based on the degree of pigmentation in skin color. As an assumed White woman in society, Stella assumes the role of ally, all while reinforcing the White patriarchal structures that previously prevented her from accessing her rights and freedoms as a Black woman. Colorism is the preferential treatment or prejudice based on varying

shades of skin color, often favoring lighter skin tones over darker ones. For example, individuals with lighter skin like Stella may be welcomed into certain social circles, yet those with darker skin face racial biases and discriminatory attitudes. Bennett's novel provides a multitude of perspectives that encompass multiple generations and locations throughout the United States, demonstrating how the attributes associated with Southern hospitality can be twisted to propagate racist intentions through White performance of allyship. Although the characters leave the South, the ingrained social customs and values remain with them, evident in their interactions with others. While not always expressed within the Southern region, the hospitality used with coworkers, neighbors, and fellow so-called allies reveals a façade of concealed acts of hostility. The pretense of innocence and general goodwill performed by the so-called arbitrators of hospitality are consciously or subconsciously used to mask and diminish the tragic experiences that Black people have faced in the United States, while also promoting a perception of socially acceptable behavior.

The myth of Southern hospitality promotes the espoused/mythical values of White Southern politeness and negates the historical connection of this social fabrication to longstanding practices of violence and discrimination against Blacks, most notably the South's history of enslavement, discrimination, and racism. In his book, *The Southern hospitality myth: ethics, politics, race, and American memory*, Anthony Szczesniul suggests that understanding the Southern hospitality myth is key to demonstrating how fictitious narratives are propagated, reinforced, and detrimental to the American collective memory. He also explains that Southern hospitality is a sugar-coated reference to a time in the South when White Americans presumed themselves superior to Blacks and ruled by force. Today the term is used to manifest an illusion of Southern White control covering up the repressed histories between White plantation owners

and enslaved people as well as the continued discriminatory acts committed by Whites. Szczesiul writes, “Historically considered, then, southern hospitality has functioned primarily as a white mythology, produced by whites, directed to a white audience, and invested in the project of maintaining white status and privilege” (7). In this regard, White Americans have fostered techniques, such as false narratives that coerce others and themselves to remember the façade of manipulated historical events, all the while slowly forgetting or refusing to acknowledge the truth of the past. This is how the American collective memory functions, ebbing and flowing with events that have their meaning either altered or forgotten altogether. These lapses in memory attempt to lessen the impacts of African American struggles that are rooted in southern racism. This presents a false narrative that negates their experiences with slavery, segregation, and discrimination. Szczesiul also discusses how the practice of Southern hospitality can ensure an obligatory exchange that involves the guest adhering to the host’s customs and norms, while the “others” -those who do not fit within that binary- are both alienated and forced into submissive roles. Extending from Szczesiul’s work, my argument, with the intention to prevent future coerced performances from those suffering from Southern hostility, underscores the significance of discerning how the Southern hospitality myth, through fostering a perception of Southern charm and kindness, functions as constructed perception employed as a disguise to mask Southern hostility.

Considering this perspective, the concept of Southern hostility suggests that Whites benefit from the use of the Southern hospitality myth, allyship, and victimization as a means to hide their racial biases. In contrast, Blacks endure hostility, compelled to perform, or conform to progress and, essentially, survive, which often hinders or prevents identity construction. In his video, Matthews underscores the prevalence of Black performance when he states, “We (Blacks)

have been performing on stage and off” (Matthews, 6:51). While Matthews does not suggest whether these performances were motivated by desire or necessity, I suggest compulsion. The forced performances of Blacks are prevalent because as Matthews clarifies racism prevents Blacks from accessing their dreams, telling their stories, and allows for continued use of their labor and talents and easy dismissal at the whims of White society (Matthews, 6:13). Societal, institutional, and individual coercion of racism has forced Blacks to perform and transform themselves to adhere to White dominated societal norms. In this work, I demonstrate that Southern hospitality is a fictional narrative and in practice allows White Americans to disguise racist/ harmful actions and intentions, dismiss the real events of the past, and prevent people of color from assessing their identities due to compulsory performance.

Using fictional representations of true events and situations enables the reader to receive a more developed understanding of the past. Suzanne Jones suggests that literary works “even though set in the past, explore interracial relationships of mutual desire and examine contemporary social concerns without neglecting the exploitation of black women or the demonization of black men that white prejudice both produced and denied” (151). Jones explains how, although historical, literary works can shed light on contemporary matters. I suggest they also have the capability, although fictional, to remind the public of truth, leading them to dispel false narratives. The solution to combatting fictitious historical narratives or rewrites of history is to represent the repressed truths throughout the range of platforms through which we tell or recount history and expose the true intentions behind some acts of Southern hospitality. This includes drama and literary works, artistic venues that have for centuries been a medium for challenging wrongs, misrepresentations, and ills of society. In fictional works such as *Blues for Mister Charlie* and *The Vanishing Half* Black creative writers contest the Southern hospitality

myth. By highlighting the challenges of constructing Black identity amid barriers posed by Southern hostility, these two fictional works underscore the past and present racism and discrimination in America. This study, expanding upon Szczesiul's exploration and analysis of Southern hospitality, contends that is not only a myth propagating the erasure of Southern racism from the collective memory but also a tool used to conceal Southern hostility. The research aims to clarify the underlying motives behind Southern hospitality arbitration, exposing the ways in which supposed allies and victims, as depicted in *Blues for Mister Charlie* and *The Vanishing Half*, strategically conceal their hostile acts behind a hospitable façade, consequently complicating identity construction of African Americans.

2 DEFINING SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY

The phrase, Southern hospitality, has held varied yet commonly positive meanings, which differ among individuals. The embodiment of the attributes typically associated with Southern hospitality tends to foster favorable outcomes for all the parties involved. While the qualities associated with Southern hospitality are inherently positive, they depict a perception of what is associated with the phrase rather than providing a definitive definition. The qualities presented have more to do with how some people believe Southern hospitality arbitrators should act and less to do with what Southern hospitality means. These attributes not only characterize Southern behavior but also fail to encompass the comprehensive narrative of Southern hospitality, including its origins, historical context, and contemporary usage. Szczesiul states that, “Today we recognize southern hospitality not from having experienced it so much as from having heard about it repeatedly in the long history of repetition and citation, and in most instances, this discourse today seems entirely emptied of any real meaning or higher ethical or moral significance” (13). If the term Southern hospitality is void of substantive meaning, it stands to reason that its definition is both restricted and insufficient. Consequently, there is a need for a more comprehensive discussion to elucidate how this phrase has evolved into a myth.

2.1 The Origins of Southern Hospitality

To discover this transition, it is crucial to examine the origins and history of Southern hospitality. According to historical records the first usage of the term Southern hospitality arose during the early 1800s and developed as a means to describe the planter class. The planter class was a group of White elites or aristocracy in the Antebellum South. Depictions of the planter elite consist of large plantation fields and enormous plantation homes. The estates in the rural South often left Southerners isolated from other planter class elite members due to the vast

distances between properties. This isolation meant that visitors would be able to come and stay for varying lengths of time, prompting the description of the virtue of hospitality in relation to the South. While Southern hospitality likely arose out of the desire to promote the luxuries of the planter class, Szczesiul explains that the earliest use of the term Southern hospitality occurred during the 1820s but evolved into a more common expression between the years of 1830 and 1860 (12).

It is important to note that in America around the 1850s, sectional tensions surrounding the issue of slavery strained the bonds between the North and the South. Szczesiul highlights the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law as a main contributor to the rising racial tension. The new law further empowered slaveholders by criminalizing the hospitality of those who sought to provide refuge to enslaved individuals that escaped to the North. Szczesiul clarifies that “the act of extending hospitality to a runaway slave was now a federal crime, punishable with excessive fines and imprisonment (77). Ironically, Southern slaveholders who prided themselves on their own hospitality sought to destroy that right for others. As in-depth analysis Szczesiul tracks the use of Southern hospitality in public record and books throughout history and points out that when racial tensions rise, the usage of Southern hospitality in written works declines. The correlation between the rise and fall of sectional tensions and the use of the phrase suggests that the term Southern hospitality was created by Southerners as a propaganda tactic against Northerners in the height of the sectional crisis over slavery, and not because Southerners possessed superior social practices (Szczesiul, 12). Eventually, after the Civil War the term would be used again as propaganda, but this time in attempts to mend the animosity between the North and the South by promoting a hospitable place to visit and live.

Southern hospitality's link to the Southern region was strengthened by the necessity for reconstruction of the American nation after the Civil War. In other words, the popularity of the term Southern hospitality arose out of the Southern need to cope with the loss of the Civil War by promoting a depiction of the South as a hospitable and friendly place to visit and live. Non-Southerners were also able to leverage Southern hospitality to ameliorate the relationship between the North and the South, also disregarding the struggles faced by African Americans, because both regions claimed that the broader goal was national reconciliation (Szczesniul, 26). The ritual of remembering a kinder South eventually developed into a deliberate technique used by White Americans to assuage their guilt or rather an attempt to reassert their power and claim of superiority over other races. Szczesniul explains that the acceptance of Southern hospitality "allowed them (Northerners) to imagine amicable social and political relationships with white southerners in the face of sectional tensions over the compromise of 1850, all at the expense of black claims of freedom and equality" (79). It becomes clear that the perpetuation of the Southern hospitality myth enabled both Southerners and Northerners to set aside their disagreements over race and solidify bonds of White solidarity.

2.2 Southern Hospitality, Race, and Gender

The notion of Southern hospitality served as a disguise that obscured the deeper racial tensions and inequalities present in the South, essentially normalizing and propagating racial injustices. Szczesniul clarifies that "From an ethical perspective, the development of the southern hospitality and tourism industry subtly repeated the dynamics of the planters classes original social practices, which likewise relied on black subordination and labor to support white privilege, status, and economic power across the South" (185). In other words, African Americans were used to support White hierarchies that exploited Black labor for the luxuries and

leisure that were afforded primarily to White Americans. The exploitation of Black labor for White gain is a form of hostility and further demonstrates the presence of hostile acts, although there is little evidence of the usage of the term Southern hostility in comparison to its counterpart.

While the term Southern hospitality refers to the promotion of a façade of southern etiquette and politeness that the host must abide by, the practice of Southern hospitality itself comes with its own set of standards for human behavior for the guest. The obligatory exchange between White host and guest implies that if the guest believes that the host is hospitable then the guest should reciprocate by following the “rules” set forth by the host (Szczesniul, 21). For example, if the host believes and enforces Black inferiority within their home, then the guest should abide by that sentiment and treat Blacks accordingly. In fact, African Americans would often be referred to as slave, servant, stranger, or other to reinforce their place outside of the host-guest dynamic. Szczesniul points out that Southern hospitality was an exclusionary practice: “Antebellum discourses of hospitality were multiple, wide-ranging, and mobile, sliding along shifting boundaries that defined the stranger or foreigner and along lines of religion, race, and class” (29). This process of identification is typically controlled by White men, suggesting that the assignment of titles (host, guest, or other) for individuals is rooted in hierarchies constructed based on White patriarchal norms. These hierarchies were established as means for White men to display their wealth, status, and privilege to other members of society and often reinforced the structural racism against Blacks in society. When describing the imbedded hierarchies within White families Steven Stowe claims that “They (men) might worry about economic ruin or political disaster, but as far as family life was concerned, the framework of hierarchy (including paternalistic control of slaves) and gender (involving white women in slave mastery) would

suffice to keep blacks down" (254). In other words, the practice of Southern hospitality was more about establishing a White identity in society as a prosperous yet gracious host and less about providing for those in need and being polite to everyone.

While the guest-host relationship within the Southern hospitality discourse promoted the inclusion of the White stranger or guest, people of color were excluded due to White fear, prejudice, or enactment of societal norm against Blacks. African Americans were typically seen as unfit to participate in Southern hospitality due to the nation's dictation of human worth and social order, which is expressed by Davis when he argues,

The tendency toward exclusion, then, did not remain applicable only to individuals but became one of the primary ways of defining the region and its culture, not only for cultural insiders but for outsiders as well. (Through "slavery" and "slave-based economy" historically provided one primary means for cultural outsiders to define the region and for cultural insiders to justify both self-perception and social order.) (Davis, 28-29)

African Americans were deemed unfit by social designation, defined by cultural insiders and outsiders, to receive rights, freedoms, and hospitality. People of color were not afforded the customary hospitality due to their race, class, and status. As enslaved individuals were unable to obtain basic human rights, they were also unable to participate in common social customs such as Southern hospitality. Black exclusion from the role of guest implicates the host's underlying motivations or intentions to be racist or discriminatory, suggesting the implementation of Southern hostility rather than genuine hospitality. To fully grasp the guest requirements for Southern hospitality, it's important to realize the specific parameters that defined who could

partake and what criteria made someone ineligible. As Szczesiul offers the parameters of religion, race, and class as determinants for a person's ability to play the role of guest, I want to add one more: gender.

Gender plays a crucial role in categorizing potential guests because the public practice of Southern hospitality generally marginalized women. Women were frequently excluded from positions of authority, (predominately held by White men). Consequently, although they could influence the processes and outcomes, they lacked direct decision-making power. I concur with Cynthia Kierner who specifies that "While masculine ideals of martial and political leadership informed the public hospitality rituals that elite men typically used to promote popular deference, elite women participated in domestic hospitality and patronage that often-reflected contemporary assumptions about women's social roles" (450). While White women may have had their own version of Southern hospitality to maintain their social standing in society, their status was primarily predicated upon the social status of their husband. According to Carole Pateman, feminists of the 19th century often compared wives to slaves as women were seen as property to their husbands, could be confined to the matrimonial home, and beaten (77). While the severity of treatment is vastly different from that of enslaved people, White women did face certain challenges and were conditioned or coerced into following specific gender roles that were set for them by White men but some White women also benefited from this hierarchical order. As African Americans were excluded from both public and domestic hospitality, they were unable to reap any benefits. On the other hand, elite White women as a part of the governing class, were able to access and influence others and therefore society (Kierner, 450). These domestic roles cast new insights on to the evolving definition of femininity in American society. In a discussion of about antebellum female tropes from the South Tara McPherson states "These variations

might help us to determine new modes of relation between femininity and feminism, sharpening our insights into masquerade and the southern performance of femininity and hospitality” (5).

Ultimately, the standards of Southern hospitality that were created and enforced by White elites required identifying or assessing a person’s eligibility to participate in the custom, and that determination was made based on religion, race, class, and gender.

Furthermore, the exclusionary and obligatory practice of Southern hospitality not only prevents African Americans from participating but also classifies and defines Black identity. In the same manner that Southern hospitality was used to promote the White identity of the host in society, the label of stranger, servant, or enslaved person was used to situate Black identity for African Americans. Szczesiul convincingly argues that the “constructed status as perpetual outsider has similarly been used to confirm the solidarity, superiority, and community of white American identity” (10). To fully understand how White directed identity designation for African Americans affects the ways in which African Americans construct Black identity or self-identify, one must first assess how Whites accomplished the feat of identity designation. In other words, how were White Americans able to cause an identity crisis within the African American population? The answer is simple: Through racist systemic policies, laws, and regulations, but more importantly through social interaction. While still being subjected to macro scale racism, African Americans were also consistently confronted with micro-scale racism by White individuals and may have developed awareness of double consciousness and internal self-hatred, which in part stemmed from the emphasis placed on the one-drop rule. The one-drop rule was a social construction that dictated that if an individual has one drop of African American blood, they are considered Black by society. This socially constructed rule unleashed an absurd internal construct of colorism where Blacks would compare their skin color to assess human worth. The

characterization of the one-drop rule is historically assessed by Jones who writes that “After emancipation, supposedly ‘scientific’ theories about the biology of race and the racial degeneration of mixed people allowed racist whites to promote the one drop rule for black identity in an attempt to maintain white racial purity and solidify white power and privilege” (208).

The one drop rule functioned as a mechanism that facilitated discrimination against Blacks because it served as a societal marker for identifying them. A hypodescent, an automatic characterization of mixed individuals into a subordinate class, is a practice that intersects with social norms, influencing how hospitality is extended or constricted based on perceived appearance of race or ethnicity. The use of the hypodescent would often cause discourse among the African American population as they began to equate the pigment of their skin to worth or value. Not only did this prompt animosity within the African American community as they were forced to compare skin tones to attribute societal worth, but it was also used as a deterrent for passing. Passing refers to the practice of an individual from one racial group presenting themselves societally and socially as a member of another racial group. To pass or present as White, Black individuals would often suppress their racial ancestry to conceal their true racial identity. Passing has historically been used for various reasons including evading racist social norms associated with racial discrimination and gaining social advantages such as perceived privileges. In times of racialized violence, passing was often employed as a Black survival technique. To describe the assiduous practice of passing Liora Moriel expresses that “Passing may thus be not an instinctual form of survival in humans, nor learned the way a language is learned, but an art form perfected by reiteration and conscious study of the rules policing passing” (170). Another Black survival strategy involves code-switching, a practice where

someone adapts or alters their personal attributes, such as their speech, appearance, or behavior to enhance comfort of those around them in order to receive of fair treatment, service, or opportunity (Courtney McCluney et al., 1). At the center of this understanding of codeswitching lies the significance of social contexts in developing how individuals present themselves. McCluney et al. “assert that Black people in the U.S. are likely to engage in racial codeswitching in professional workplaces given their severe underrepresentation in professional occupations and consistent experiences with discrimination, stereotyping, and systemic barriers” (2). While code-switching can be utilized by any marginalized group, Blacks primarily use this technique, altering their language, grammar, and other personal attributes to appear to fit into the White-dominated culture.

The constant self-evaluation forces African Americans to continually assess not only the way they are perceived but also how they exist in society, which often complicates self-identification and identity construction. Studies on this aspect of African American life and acculturation in the US date back to the earliest era of sociology as a scholarly discipline. In a sociological study of multiculturalism in America authors, John McCarthy and William Yancey assessed the identity crisis within the Black community and state that “it is suggested that the development of a public facade by the accommodating Negro does not result in a successful separation of self from role, but a confusion over what constitutes self and a lack of understanding and acceptance of self, since he is unable to effectively maintain a dual identity without impairment” (653). Due to the potential retribution, social exclusion, or violence, Black individuals may find themselves compelled to conform or transform their authentic selves. These alterations can create discomfort for Blacks, hindering their ability or desire to engage in Southern hospitality rituals, specifically with those who express Southern hostility or lack an

understanding of their experiences. Ultimately, the distrust of others or the feeling of having to conform may extend inwards forming a lack of self-acceptance. The lack of self-acceptance prevents African Americans from participating in social spaces as themselves and ultimately lends credibility to the White social control that White Americans, particularly men, have over society and the individuals within it.

If Southern hospitality is a deceptive façade manifested by White people and complicit individuals in society, then authentic depictions of historically and currently racist doctrine and hateful speech, as portrayed in literary works, offer a means for Americans to acknowledge the underlying Southern hostility. White Americans attempt to divert attention from historical injustices, a tactic that aligns with Szczesiul's assertion that groups "block or manipulate memory as they construct a shared cultural identity, selectively remembering some events or details of the historical past while repressing others, allowing them to be forgotten" (23). To combat and eventually eliminate the racist tendencies in America it is imperative to incite recognition for these fictitious narratives through the fictional representations of a genuine American past, such as those found in literary works. Counteracting the Southern hospitality narrative, shedding light on the enactment of Southern hostility, and mending the issues of White reputation, dishonesty, and entitlement that is inextricably linked to so-called allies and victims will likely enable African Americans to construct their identities more effectively.

3 *BLUES FOR MISTER CHARLIE*

In the diverse landscape of Southern culture, writers and dramatists may wield their pens to recount historical events and experiences; however, in the context of Southern hospitality, a myth maintained to conceal a chauvinistic past, literary works and theatrical productions provide a platform for exploring and challenging such myths. Productions like *Blues for Mister Charlie* expose how individuals can use the façade of Southern hospitality as a guise while engaging in acts of hostility, emphasizing the power of theater in confronting complex issues that are deeply ingrained in Southern society. Baldwin navigates the intricate interplay between the warm façade of Southern hospitality and the often-veiled undercurrents of hostility, crafting a narrative that peels back the layers of this complex social dynamic. Within the narrative, Baldwin uses flashbacks to retell the aftermath of the brutal murder of a fourteen-year-old boy, Emmett Till. On August 28, 1955, in Money, Mississippi Till was abducted, beaten, lynched, and shot by Roy Bryant and his half-brother, J.W. Milam. The murder of Till was one event that captivated the nation. To speak to the magnitude of uproar that occurred after the death of Emmett Till Sarah Rubin states that, “His death haunts Americans, as a touchstone, a reminder of how bad things once were, and perhaps how far they have yet to come” (47). Till’s death, like so many others, reminds the public of the atrocities that African Americans have faced, and how White Southern customs can obscure the extent of Black suffering. *Blues for Mister Charlie* uses the pretense of Southern hospitality within the retelling of actual events to expose the veneer of warmth that often conceals underlying hostilities perpetuated by so-called allies and victims, offering an evocative commentary on the persistent racial tensions in Southern society.

The contrasting nature between hospitality and hostility underscores the stark inequalities and injustices that permeate within Baldwin’s fictional society, shedding light on the

complexities of race, reputation, and honor within the broader context of the play. These themes are expressed through acts of Southern hospitality, where societal expectations typically dictate social interactions, creating a dynamic where one's race significantly influences the perceptions of reputation and honor. If reputation and honor are based on societal customs which influence social interactions, then identity construction becomes intricately tied into the fabric of these customs, emphasizing how individuals navigate social expectations and biases to shape their sense of self. Adhering to norms and expectations outside of one's own racial background further complicates identity construction; therefore, African Americans often deal with alienated Black identity, which Baldwin investigates in *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Baldwin exposes how the pretense of Southern hospitality can conceal acts of hostility leading to Black alienation. Within this section, I investigate how White performances of hospitality, allyship, and victimhood are inextricably linked to dishonesty, reputation, and entitlement, while also shedding light on the ways in which Baldwin demonstrates that the implementation of Southern hostility negatively impacts the Black characters' formation of identity.

Before examining how the façade of Southern hospitality masks acts of hostility, I will demonstrate how Baldwin characterizes the Southern social environment. *Blues for Mister Charlie* is a social commentary drama about the struggles that African Americans faced during the height of the Civil Rights movement, yet Baldwin highlights the suffering of a White male character, Parnell, by ironically titling the play after the nickname or reference that some Blacks used to describe archetypal White men, Mister Charlie. The term Mister Charlie often represented the oppressive or racist authority figures. Even though Mister Charlie is the authority figure, Koritha Mitchell highlights that "the text is also relentless in insisting that 'Mister Charlie' suffers," therefore suggesting that "the whites who have created the circumstances that

constrain black life are also ailing, also poisoned” (54). By asserting that White men can sing the blues, Baldwin accentuates the suffering experienced by White people, simultaneously calling attention to the different levels of suffering experienced between White and Black individuals.

Baldwin’s choice to pair the term Mister Charlie with the blues likely suggests that while White men can experience suffering, Black people can experience similar suffering, heightened by other systematic layers of racism. Although Parnell, defined as ally through his actions, attitudes, and relationships with both White and Black characters, has the capacity to empathize with the suffering of the Black characters, the play does not depict him undergoing the level of loss or pain that they do. Given that prevailing social norms would only acknowledge the pain and suffering of the White characters in the story, Baldwin ironically titles the play in reference to Parnell, even though he does not truly suffer to the same magnitude. The level of suffering is reflected by the magnitude or degree of pain, distress, or hardship the characters endure throughout the play. The Black characters contend with grief of losing loved ones, fight for fundamental human rights, and grapple with identity crises, all while living in constant fear of being murdered because of the color of their skin. In contrast, Parnell’s main risk is that he may lose his social reputation and, perhaps, his moral standing. In his notes on the play, Baldwin discusses reputation and honor when he states that “It is we who have forbidden him (the White man), on pain of exclusion from the tribe, to accept his beginnings, when he and black people loved each other, and rejoice in them, and use them; It is we who have made it mandatory-honorable-that white father should deny black son” (xv). Baldwin dictates that it is the fear of exclusion and honor that drives White behavior; therefore, implying a link between Southern customs and conduct.

3.1 Race Relations and Feigned allyship

One such Southern custom, hospitality, is critiqued throughout the three-act play that focuses on Parnell's interactions with both White and Black characters, along with the events surrounding the murder of a young Black man, Richard Henry. While Southern hospitality arbitration may typically be associated with extending kindness or an inclusive attitude towards guests or strangers, Baldwin swiftly establishes that this is not the case in Plaguetown, Mississippi. Baldwin communicates a distinct departure from the anticipated norms of Southern hospitality, suggesting a divergence from the usual expectations of Southern behavior when he exposes the integration illusion. The integration myth refers to the fictitious belief that integration between Black and White people occurs seamlessly, rapidly, and without significant challenges, discrimination, or barriers. As scholars who define the integration illusion, Leonard Steinhorn and Barbara Diggs-Brown suggest that since "there remain stubborn obstacles to full black opportunity and overwhelming economic disparities between blacks and whites—we must acknowledge it as real and tangible evidence that America is desegregating. But we are simply not integrating" (16). The oversimplification of the integration process, desegregation of communities and institutions, contributes to the integration fallacy, further progressing the notion that Whites and Blacks regularly commune together. Examples of the integration illusion includes, "Images of racial integration served up ubiquitously by whites in power, from the rhetoric of politicians to the colorblind casting of Broadway shows to the black and white buddies that are de rigueur in television commercials and big budget films" (Jones, 12).

Staging and casting of television shows and plays that use the Southern myths of hospitality and integration to foster an illusion of racial equality often do not accurately reflect the realities of interracial interactions and relationships. This is not to say that the presence of

Black and White actors performing together is wrong, but rather to suggest that it is more important to see representations across the color line in plots that do not neglect the implications of race. For example, Baldwin does not neglect the truth about race relations in America as he deconstructs the integration illusion by establishing a separatory community of Blacktown and Whitetown. He directs that on stage the “aisle also functions as the division between Whitetown and Blacktown. The action among the blacks takes place on the side of the stage, the action among the whites on the opposite side of the stage” (1). Here, Baldwin asserts that the community is by no means integrated, yet he strategically informs the audience that the integration illusion is not only present in his reiteration, but it is also dismantled through the insistence upon racial separation. The dismantlement of the integration illusion as Mitchell explains “offers a portrait of the United States that foregrounds the tension between self and other. After all, Plaguetown is made up of ‘Blacktown’ and ‘Whitetown,’ designations that suggest that they are opposites whose occupants are not at all related” (54). The designation of divisional racial groups emphasizes the separation and the juxtaposition of self and others, highlighting the lack of unity and absence of hospitality.

The absence of hospitality is evident in the separation of racial groups, but the façade is implemented in a seemingly hospitable act portrayed by Parnell in the first act of the play. Baldwin uses Parnell, a neutral party or ally between the two conflicting racial groups, to assess the situations in both Blacktown and Whitetown. In fact, Parnell comes to inform Reverend Meridian that Lyle Britten, local shopkeeper, and the White man who murdered Richard Henry (Reverend Meridian’s son), was going to be arrested. Parnell kindly greets Reverend Meridian, Mother Henry, and the students by saying, “Hello, my friends. I bring glad tidings of great joy” (Baldwin, 6). By addressing them as friends Parnell expresses warmth and friendliness, which

suggests an endearing attitude associated with politeness, cordiality, and an inclusive demeanor. As the host Reverend Meridian enacts hospitality by welcoming Parnell to his church in Blacktown and Parnell as the guest reciprocates by offering a friendly greeting and sharing vital news. In this case, Southern hospitality arbitration for Parnell is extended beyond welcoming someone into his space and rather is portrayed through his choice of language that suggests community and connection, insinuating his effort to establish a positive and inclusive relationship. Since hospitality is multi-faceted and can extend to acts of kindness, transparency, and a willingness to engage with others in a supportive and considerate manner, even outside the confines of one's home, Parnell's hospitality arbitration is expressed through verbal communication, friendly demeanor, and genuine concern he expresses for the victims of Richard Henry's murder. Additionally, referring to one as friend implies an interpersonal relationship that possesses the Southern hospitality factors of kindness, warmth, and an interest to make others feel at ease, which may explain why Parnell proceeds to tell them of Lyle's impending arrest, insinuating hope that they would receive justice for Richard's death. Not only did Parnell tell them about the arrest but he also divulges his participation in securing Lyle's arrest, which further heightens the hospitable act. While seemingly hospitable, Parnell's actions demonstrate the performance of feigned allyship rather than adhere to genuine hospitality.

Parnell's actions demonstrate feigned allyship, not only telling the Black characters that Lyle would be arrested but to also by helping make sure he was arrested, because he enacts hostility when he decides to warn Lyle of his impending arrest. Parnell uses the same hospitality or courtesy of friendship to inform the victims associated with Richard's death that he uses for Richard's murderer, which he explains when he states "I think I should go to Lyle's house to warn him. After all, I brought it about and he is a friend of mine" (Baldwin, 6). While being

friends with someone who has wronged another friend is not necessarily an indication of hostility, engaging with or maintaining relationships that are detrimental to the victimized party - Richard's loved ones- is an act of hostility. In other words, by warning Lyle, Parnell is actively contributing to the discord between Reverend Meridian and Lyle. While Parnell does not actively or intentionally create animosity between Reverend Meridian and Lyle, he acts a complicit accomplice to the horrific acts that Lyle commits against Richard Henry and the Black community because he continues to maintain a relationship with him. By remaining friends with Lyle, Parnell not only contradicts his written and verbal criticism of those who refuse to advocate for social justice for Blacks, but he also reinforces his role as accomplice due to his inability to act rather than only speak out against injustice solidifies his role as complicit accomplice. When Parnell advocates for the interests of Black characters he is viewed as an ally; however, his support for a racist murderer reveals his allyship as a performative façade that ultimately contributes to White solidarity perpetuation.

3.2 Reputation and Insincere Acts of Southern Hospitality

The performance of hospitality is not confined to those who simulate allyship but includes those who employ dishonesty. An illustrative example occurs when Richard and Lyle encounter one another for the first time at Papa D's Juke Joint. In this meeting, Lyle extends a seemingly polite platitude they accidentally bump into one another. However, when Richard responds with an attitude, Lyle swiftly questions his identity and origin. In the context of Southern hospitality, as a stranger from the North, Richard should ideally be welcomed with kindness. While the interaction was perceivably hospitable on the surface, both the contrary indications from other characters and Lyle's past and future actions demonstrate otherwise. According to Pete, who engages with Richard immediately after watching their encounter, Lyle's

apparent expression of goodwill was insincere. Pete's remark, "are you anxious to leave this world? Because he wouldn't think nothing of helping you of it" implies a menacing undertone in Lyle's behavior, implying a potential willingness to cause harm rather than sincerely extend hospitality (Baldwin, 31). Not only do other characters consistently warn Richard about Lyle, but they also explain that Lyle is rumored to have already murdered and gotten away with another Black man before he kills Richard.

Lyle's performance of hospitality or the dishonest act of welcoming Richard becomes evident as more characters expose his past actions of hostility against Black people, including his murder of a man named Old Bill. It is rumored that Lyle murdered Old Bill because he was the husband of Willa Mae, a Black woman that Lyle would later rape. By creating Richard, a Black man who has consensual sex with White women and Lyle, a White man raping Black women, Baldwin subverts the societal perception of Black men as "Black rapists." This reversal of sexuality allows Baldwin's audience to realize their own perceptions and biases when it comes to sexuality, which is highlighted by Sonia Potter who writes that "The idea that both men participate in interracial love affairs—as well as the fact that Lyle is actually the character that evidently rapes black women—shatter the 'black rapist' trope, showing that toxic or hypersexuality is nonexclusive to either race" (8). Since Southern hospitality often carries expectations of gender roles, repression of sexuality in certain settings, and purity culture it is clear how this cultural norm influences social behavior and impacts the public perception of sexuality in general. The subversion of the rapist trope enables Baldwin to illustrate the façade of Southern hospitality, revealing the underlying racial and sexual biases that persist within its societal fabric.

The subversion of sexuality and masculinity across racial lines exposes how the performance of Southern hospitality by Lyle in public settings can be used to set up the pretense of victimhood. Lyle pretends to be courteous to Richard in public to protect his reputation and to establish his innocence before he commits his horrific act of hostility. The importance of reputation in Southern communities is expressed by Bertram Wyatt-Brown when he states that “Because family purity- in lineage and reputation- was the bedrock of personal and group honor, lynchings and charivari both before and after the Civil War were concerned with misconduct, real or imagined, that threatened familial security and status” (436). Lyle’s concern for his reputation drives him to perform dishonest acts of hospitality; however, in more private settings, the genuine antagonistic attitudes come to light. In a flashback, Richard and his friend Lorenzo arrive at Jo and Lyle’s shop and a fight between Richard and Lyle ensues. While Richard does not physically harm or threaten Lyle or Jo, Lyle is knocked to the ground in the midst of Richard defending himself. Not only did Lyle or Jo not demonstrate Southern hospitality to potential customers in their private shop, but they went on to display Southern hostility by pretending as if they were victims of this interaction with Richard. Lyle amplifies this victimization by insinuating that he deserves penance for being wronged, going as far to associate this grievance with Richard’s life; this is exacerbated by the lasting effects of this hostile act, which obstructed the assessment of masculinity and therefore identity for Meridian.

Since Southern hostility impedes the Black man’s assessment of their manhood, they often seek other means to legitimize their masculinity. For example, Meridian questions his own manhood when he states, “I’ve had to think-would I have been such a Christian if I hadn’t been born black? Maybe I had to become a Christian in order to have any dignity at all. Since I wasn’t a man in men’s eyes, then I could be a man in the eyes of God” (Baldwin, 38). Here, Baldwin

makes the argument that Black men should not seek the validation of their manhood from society as it has historically stripped men of their manhood through various acts of racial violence and discrimination. Furthermore, Baldwin demonstrates how Black morality is used by some White individuals, such as Parnell, to insist that Whites only need time and some leniency to begin mending the racial disparities, which is clearly not the case. This flipping of moral standards is embodied in Parnell's pleading statements to Meridian. For instance, when Meridian is explaining how he has reached his limit and is beginning to consider a more violent response to the murder of Black sons, Parnell pleads, "But you must have mercy on us" (Baldwin, 40). The incredulous belief that White people simply need more time to learn how not to discriminate against or murder Black people baffles Meridian and reinforces Baldwin's point that even though Blacks are the victims, they are historically choosing the nonviolent response to devastating racial injustice.

Parnell further characterizes Southern hostility when he flips the moral standards by twisting the narrative and asserting that Whites are victims of social injustice too and Black people should realize that and take it into consideration. This is clear when Parnell states "The poor whites have been just as victimized in this part of the world as the blacks have ever been!" (Baldwin, 41). The notion, while untrue, highlights the ways in which White bigots attempt to replace Black suffering with White suffering, diminishing the violent and prejudicial pasts experienced by African Americans. Szczesiul contends that flipping historical narratives and asserting white suffering "turned white southerners into victims, noting first the 'hardships' (white) southerners have faced since the civil war and the depression in indirectly suggesting that it was unfair to criticize the South for its racist unrest of the times because the north had racial problems as well" (197). The strategy of flipping the narrative and attempting to replace Black

suffering with White suffering is the implementation of Southern hostility. Using White suffering as a means to downplay or diminish the suffering experienced by Black people is another way to assert victimhood. While it is true that White individuals can indeed experience suffering, using that suffering as a justification for why Black people should tolerate or excuse racist behavior creates a hostile environment for Blacks.

3.3 White Southern Hospitality, Black Exclusion, and Feigned Victimhood

The most prominent perceived victim in the story, Lyle, never attempts to use his suffering as evidence of his victimhood, but rather claims complete innocence and embraces White solidarity within his White community to magnify his status as victim. Lyle's use of his community to amplify his supposed innocence occurs in a scene where Jo and Lyle invite other White members of the community to a party. In this scene the paradigms of Southern hospitality, including guest/host interactions and the theory of obligatory exchange are enacted. The Brittens have a party consisting of only White community members before Lyle's trial, exemplifying how White guests are able to receive hospitality yet Black individuals are excluded. One guest, Hazel uses Southern hospitality within the guest/host relationship in attempts to lift Jo's spirits and remind her of her role as a woman and host, when she states, "Don't you go around here with a great long face, trying to demoralize your guests. I won't have it. You too young and pretty for that" (Baldwin, 46). By mentioning Jo's appearance, Hazel reinforces the expected standards of Southern womanhood. McPherson explains that the social customs of the South dictated that a refined White woman, often referred to as a belle, had to act in a particular manner to maintain her worth when she states, "Properly packaged, mannerisms perfected, the belle traverses particular regional spaces with ease (and, of course, grace); other spaces remain off-limits, beyond the proper domains of the refined southern woman" (151). As a host Jo is meant to be

hospitable to her guests, all while maintaining composed, which further highlights how appearance affects reputation within the social fabric of Southern society.

Appearance and performance play hand in hand, especially in public settings where guests harbor expectations about the host, and the host, in turn, expects that guests conform to their preferences. The theory of obligatory exchange is embodied in the host's expectations for the guest conformity. An instance of obligatory exchange occurs when Parnell arrives at the party. When the party goers initially see Parnell arriving, they make salacious comments about his drinking habits and physical appearance, but when he is in their presence, they all immediately switch to Southern hospitality platitudes of politeness, welcoming and flattering him. Things take a turn when Ellis, one of the guests, asks him where he stands on issues of social justice. A verbal altercation ensues between Parnell and the other guests and the host, Jo, attempts to both scold Parnell and change the subject when she exclaims "Parnell! You are the limit! Would anybody else like a little more coffee" (Baldwin, 52). In this interaction Parnell is expected by both the host and the other guests to adhere to the customs and norms set forth by the group, which in this case is White solidarity.

The ultimate performance of hospitality is enacted in the third act, when the case is brought to court. In the final act, the scene opens at Lyle's trial, roughly three months after Richard's death. The jury consists of all White people -racist and biased in the lack of African American representation-; the members of the audience consist of members of Blacktown and Whitetown. Assembling a jury composed solely of White people is a hostile act that shows a biased and exclusionary approach. The state is clearly seeking to portray a semblance of hospitality by instituting legal proceedings against Lyle, most likely as a procedural formality due to the orders the police chief received from the North. This formality embodies the distorted

manifestation of Southern hospitality where the legal system is used to appear fair but is tainted by underlying biases and discriminatory practices that constitute hostility. In attempts to explain Black resilience in defiance of legal hostility Melissa Milewski asserts that “black southerners—even as they experienced segregation, disfranchisement, and violence—continued to seek to navigate the legal system in both civil and criminal cases to gain the best outcomes for themselves and their families, and at times their larger communities” (1137). This Black resilience is demonstrated in Meridian’s willingness to provide testimony during the trial.

Meridian’s testimony embodies Black resilience because he chooses to participate in the farse of a trial, even though he has been assured multiple times that he will not receive justice for his son’s death. Not only does the state create a sham of a trial but they also question Meridian’s moral character. Religion arises when the prosecutor accuses Reverend Meridian of being responsible for Richard’s death: “perhaps the difficulties your son had in accepting the Christian faith is due to your use of the pulpit as a forum for irresponsible notions concerning social equality, Reverend Henry” (Baldwin, 102). Here, the state uses the intersection of church and state to question Reverend Meridian’s devotion to his personal beliefs, faith, and son, rather than promote sympathy for a father who has lost his son. The state’s lack of compassion and critical examination of Meridian’s religious choices is one way that White people could use religion to justify the White hierarchical structures that were established by them. Szczesiul explains how religion and social customs feed into the hierarchal social order when he states, “They (Southerners), like other Americans, saw hospitality as both a Christian moral imperative and a pleasing social ritual; more than other Americans, they also saw it as a manifestation of an inherently aristocratic, hierarchical social order” (61). If participating in the moral imperative of Southern hospitality reinforces White hierarchical structures, then Black people who participate

in hospitable social customs with White people are adhering to White power structures and therefore are not receiving true equality. Baldwin takes this notion a step further by comparing equality with equity through Meridian's response: "I do not wish to see Negroes become the equal of their murderers. I wish us to become equal to ourselves. To become a people so free in themselves that they will have no need to-fear-others- and have no need to murder others" (Baldwin, 102). Baldwin addresses the need for African Americans to be seen as human, not lesser, or equal to Whites, but equal to themselves. To be equal with themselves and reach true equity, African Americans would most likely need the deconstruction of White power structures that perpetuate White values and learn to fully understand themselves as people through self-evaluation and self-identification. Engaging in self-assessment and self-recognition is a fundamental process in shaping one's sense of identity. One White power structure that prevents identity construction is the arbitration of Southern hostility, which prevents Blacks from reaching equity.

Baldwin's message of how White power structures reinforce alienated Black identity and prevents Black individuals from reaching equity becomes clear during the final scenes of the play. The message of alienated identity with the framework of Southern hostility delves into how the behavior of White individuals, including their performance, dishonesty, and entitlement, impact the process of Black identity construction. While assessing that the play was mostly about the outrageous circumstances of blatant racism that African Americans were forced to deal with during the Civil Rights movement, it is also important to realize that the play is also about understanding one's own identity in relation to your respective communal identity. Emmanuel Nelson clarifies that "presenting a sad picture of a divided humanity of an aspect of one's human nature amounts to a denial of a part of one's identity; second, it incapacitates that individual from

fruitful and fulfilling interpersonal and communal experience” (27). While Nelson suggests the issue of Black identity is the divisive community that forces the denial of part of one’s self and prevents the identification of a communal identity, the bigger problem is that often Blacks create their identity based on the White biases present in society. McCarthy and Yancey clarify that “the crisis of identity and loss of self-esteem derive largely from the images of himself which the Negro receives from the white community: the self emerges through interaction with significant others. Developing self-identity and self-esteem depends not merely upon objective social characteristics, but also upon the judgment of these characteristics by relevant others” (653).

If White superiority is mainstream and Blacks can only assess their worth through the lens of White social order, then Blacks must subconsciously or internally deal with the false notion of Black inferiority. According to Orozimbo Neto, “The construction of an African American ethos opposing white principles is a first step for mending black communities and finding ways to build healthy African American manhood and womanhood models” (139). If Southern hospitality mandates that Whites (particularly men) enforce the social hierarchy in society then it is clear why African Americans would struggle with self-construction and self-identification. Nelson explains that “Baldwin's implication is clear: one ought to establish one's individual identity and find one's center within oneself, not in opposition to but in harmony with one's communal identity” (30). *Blues for Mister Charlie* suggests that it is difficult enough for African Americans to survive the racist climate of the South, which means they are often left unable to establish their own identities in relation to others or their respective communities and are forced to perform or transform into other identities. Baldwin demonstrates the difficulty of identity construction for Blacks through the identity crisis expressed by Parnell. In a heated debate with himself Parnell elucidates his desire to “be transformed, formed, liberated out of this

grey-white envelope. Jesus! I've always been afraid. Afraid of what I saw in their eyes? They don't love me, certainly. You don't love them, either! Sick with a disease only white men catch. Blackness" (Baldwin, 106). As a liberal writer and friend to both Black people and a White racist and potential murderer, Parnell conveys his longing to transcend the Black/White barriers. If Parnell as a White man is unable to cross the racial boundary of understanding what is truly like to be Black due to social and societal constraints, then it is clear that it is even more difficult for Black people to connect with and construct their desired identities due to the additional racial constraints of inequality that is placed upon them. This emphasizes how the deeply ingrained racial hierarchies instruct identity construction and illustrates the challenges that those attempting to transform their identities often face. As Neto suggests, the only way to counteract negative/self-demonizing Black identity construction is "To reject the models set by white mainstream society, which is sexist, racist and socially biased, is fundamental for African American people to find their way back to their roots and their completeness" (139).

This notion suggests that to find completeness African Americans must be honest with themselves, recognize that their self-worth may be derived from White ideals, and work to alleviate the harmful consequences of Southern hostility. While in *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Baldwin's messages included the unmasking of Southern myths and their effects, such as issues with identity construction, his other works also offer immense insight into these issues. Baldwin has several messages within his multiple works to offer his readers and his audiences, Marlene Mosher amalgamates the messages into one when she states that, "the 'message' in Baldwin's various works is, foremost, how blacks can survive a racist America" (112). As for Baldwin's message to White people perhaps he would suggest that in order for White people to avoid enacting Southern hostility, they must be honest with themselves about the roles they play in

society, become sincere allies, and not contribute to the pervasive nature of racism like Parnell did. When questioned about Richard's death, Parnell attests that Richard inherited a commendable character from his father, Reverend Henry. However, he refrains from mentioning that Jo's account of the events was untrue and does not provide the court with the information that Lyle provided him regarding the details of Richard's murder. Parnell's silence contributes to his complicity in the racist acts committed by Lyle, while also suggesting that Parnell realized that he would be safer in this community if he kept his mouth shut. The trial ends and Lyle is found not guilty.

3.4 Entitlement and So-called Justified Violence

The final flashback depicts Lyle murdering an unarmed Richard who refuses to apologize for the incident that happened in the store. As his defense, Lyle states, "I had to kill him then. I'm a white man! Can't nobody talk that way to me!" (Baldwin, 120). The fact that Lyle uses his skin color as a justification for murder exemplifies the power of social hierarchy shaped out of white racism and demonstrates "something more about the social order men sought to define while defending their personal honor" (Stowe, 33). It is evident that the practice of Southern hospitality for White men includes implications of social honor that accompanies White entitlement. The White entitlement manifests from White constructed hierarchies where we as a society, according to Baldwin, "have persuaded him that negroes are worthless human beings, and that it is his sacred duty, as a white man, to protect the honor and purity of his tribe" (xv). The designations of social status have made White empowered some White men to think that they are owed what is rightfully theirs, whether that be power, respect, or honor, all of which can only be obtained through degrading the other, African Americans. White solidarity and entitlement because as Wyatt-Brown explains "honor was inseparable from hierarchy and entitlement, defense of family

blood and community needs. All of these exigencies required the rejection of the lowly, the alien, and the shamed” (4). Take Lyle, for instance. His actions exemplify Southern hostility and his entitlement to treat human beings as property is evident in his interactions with his wife and the Black characters throughout the play.

To place this fictional representation in a more historical setting, Baldwin’s character, Lyle, represents the real-life murderers of Emmett Till, Bryant and Milam, in the fact that they all demanded respect from a society that never seemed to give them enough. Rubin argues that as poor White shopkeepers “Bryant and Milam lived on the economic margin; they occupied a liminal position in local white society. They were acutely sensitive to slights and insults and constantly struggled for the respect that they, as white men, believed was their due” (51). With Rubin’s analysis, it seems that all of these men committed acts of violence when they believed they were not receiving the respect they deserved as White men, but it was also society’s complicity in their acts that made them believe they had the *right* to murder those that society deemed inferior. While the men may have physically committed the act alone, it was the support of the White community and state that assured them that they could and would get away with the horrific act; therefore, insinuating that the White racist social order provided the right environment for malicious acts to be carried out without fear of repercussion.

While *Blues for Mister Charlie* is loosely based on the murder of Emmett Till, the implications of the murder of an innocent Black man and the acquittal of two guilty White men, remains commonplace in the US South and the nation. The guise of Southern hospitality or the practice of norms of politeness shielded the real antagonists from being punished. Instead, the people who truly suffered from Southern hostility, were not provided justice. In the end, Lyle refuses to apologize for Richard’s death and the play ends with the Black characters walking in a

protest march with Parnell, demonstrating to the audience that we can all walk our own paths.

Whether we as individuals choose to acknowledge how a racist/white imposed American collective memory has distorted our understanding of the present, it is more important to realize that it does not matter if Black victims are guilty or innocent, especially in this situation of racial bias. Rubin suggests that “By debating Emmett Till's guilt or innocence, we are saved from confronting the reality of the killers' unpunished guilt” (54). Rather than assessing whether the murder was justified, it is crucial to prioritize rectifying the injustice and preventing other incidences like this from happening in the future. I argue that to pave the way for a better future, free from or limited to lesser accounts of racial discourse and violence, the public must recognize the injustices that are intertwined with the practice of Southern hostility that instills White dishonesty, and entitlement.

4 THE VANISHING HALF

The pretense of Southern hospitality, allyship, and victimhood also conflicts the construction of Black identity in the novel, *The Vanishing Half*, by Brit Bennett. As the title suggests, the novel is about the separation of self and identity, exploring the lengths that some individuals are willing/forced to go to be considered valuable or desirable in society. The novel questions the authenticity of the characters' identities through examining the impact of societal expectations, the external portrayal of identity, and the internal conflicts that ensue when individuals intentionally separate their outward identity from their genuine selves. The author, Brit Bennett, uses examples of character performance, transition, or transformation to question the role of ally or victim and to demonstrate the burden of identity construction imposed upon Blacks in relation to White entitlement, dishonesty, and reputation. To do this, Bennett weaves through the past and the present to provide a multi-generational and multi-geographic story of twin sisters, Desiree and Stella, and their respective daughters, Jude, and Kennedy, from the 1950s to the 1990s. While set in the past, this story presents the repressed truths of racial injustice and demonstrates historical reflections on Black women's lived experiences, exemplifying the lingering impacts of racism. The historical reflection found within Bennett's narrative aligns with a longstanding trend in Black writing, exemplifying what Jones characterizes as "a deep need to recover repressed truth about past interracial intimacy that too many people, white southerners especially, have refused to acknowledge" (151). The historical reflection within Bennett's novel is propelled by a profound desire to remember, embody, and replicate the customs of the South, even when departing from the region. The recognition of underlying hostility, revealed through the critique of Southern hospitality in *The Vanishing Half*, contributes to a nuanced understanding of the hindrances faced in identity construction for Black

individuals. This examination emphasizes how concealed hostilities embedded in societal expectation like those accompanying Southern hospitality impede the authentic, uninhibited development of Black identities, which characterizes the interconnected relationship between the preservation of the past, social expectations, and the challenges posed by underlying hostilities.

To situate how social customs, particularly Southern hospitality, persists beyond the geographic boundaries of the South, Bennett establishes a precedent of longing for home, evoking similar emotions the characters experience when they were in that familiar setting. The town that Stella, Desiree, and Jude grew up in was Mallard, Louisiana which was a town fostered on the acceptance of only White skinned African Americans. The town's premise only to accept light skin Blacks was formulated by Stella and Desiree's distant grandfather, Decuir, who the narrator describes as a man who founded the town for men like him, men "who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes" (Bennett, 6). By consistently classifying individuals' skin color for social acceptance or rejection, Bennett demonstrates the pervasive nature of colorism perpetuated by society. Societal and social acceptance or rejection and the freedoms that come with the perception of skin color is what prompts the twin's separation when Stella becomes a White woman, Stella Sanders, choosing to raise her daughter, Kennedy, as White, and Desiree remains African American, raising her daughter, Jude, as Black. The narrative serves as a scope through which societal and social impacts of racism are magnified within the commentary embedded in Bennet's storytelling evidenced by Caroline Maas Rue: "Bennett's decision to present her two protagonists as identical twins allows Bennett to underscore just how humanly fabricated and completely intangible the categorization of race is to begin with" (23). This portrayal of colorism underscores how the welcoming gestures of Southern hospitality can be tainted by racial bias, emphasizing the profound effects that

discriminatory practices or the enactment of Southern hostility have on individuals' sense of belonging.

Despite enduring racial discrimination from other African Americans, that was instilled and reinforced by White social and societal hierarchies, Bennett's characters still long for their roots. Unlike other people from Mallard, Desiree chose to marry a dark Black man named Sam and when she referenced home he states "'negroes always love our hometowns' he said. 'even though we're always from the worst places. Only white folks get the freedom to hate home'" (Bennett, 24). The importance of the ingrained Southern values within the characters is magnified through familial connection that is inextricably tied to the South because that is where their family originated. Even when the characters go beyond Mallard, New Orleans, and Arkansas, similar societal and social issues persist in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, New York, and Minneapolis. The narrator explains that although the twins left Mallard it was clear that the characters would soon learn that "You can escape a town, but you cannot escape blood. Somehow, the Vignes twins believe themselves capable of both" (Bennett, 7). Here, Bennett both foreshadows and explores what Jones characterizes as the historical and familial ties to "blood" that continue to draw interest for Blacks who are interested in understanding or gaining perspective on their relationship to the African diaspora (70). Although Stella and Desiree don't fully understand how the South will continually impact their lives at first, Jude immediately recognizes the South's influence on her perception of self and of life, which is exemplified by the narrator who states, "She wasn't in Mallard anymore but somehow, the town wouldn't leave her" (Bennett, 141). To cope with the Southern social and societal influence the characters endured their individual quests for belonging, combatting the consequences of Southern hostility, manifested in the adoption of strategies like performance, transition, and transformation. The

intriguing aspects of the journey for authenticity using these various strategies is how the character's mind, now free from Southern expectations, continued to explore and shape their experiences even after their physical departure from the South.

As the mind explores these physical spatial landscapes, it constructs extensive mental frameworks by which it can extend beyond what an individual is able to interact with or experience in their direct environment. The mind's capacity for conceptualization allows it to form comprehensive and cohesive spatial schemata that surpass the limitations or boundaries of physical space (Davis, 135). With this understanding, it can be surmised that social norms and customs, such as Southern hospitality are ingrained within identity formation and thus continue to influence the character's behavior in and outside the Southern region. I argue that *The Vanishing Half* deconstructs the framework through which racial, regional, and gendered identities are performed, transitioned, and transformed by exposing how upholding Southern hospitality values and customs are connected to the underlying hostilities of White entitlement, dishonesty, and reputation that complicate identity construction for Black individuals. To characterize the themes of White entitlement, dishonesty, and reputation, Bennett uses character examples of performance, transition, and transformation. Each act is exemplified through one or more characters, showcasing how societal expectations and social customs like Southern hospitality shape identity construction, impacting not only the individuals directly involved but often influencing their children as well.

4.1 Coping Strategies of Black Performance, Transition, and Transformation

One of the strategies used to cope, performance, was employed both as a means to entertain others but also as a veiled authenticity exemplified through the characters Barry and Kennedy who used carefully crafted personas to create a space where they could express

themselves. Performance is about becoming someone else or changing your identity temporarily to serve a purpose. The key is understanding that performance is temporary and only a piece of one's identity. To explore the relationship between performance and identity, Bennett contrasts two characters, Barry/Bianca and Kennedy, to illustrate the multifaceted nature of identity. Bennett uses the character, Barry/Bianca, a drag artist firmly rooted in his/her identity and Kennedy, who lacks a stable connection to her true self due to the deceptive narratives woven by her mother, Stella, regarding her racial identity and familial background. Barry embodies a seamless integration of performance into his life. As a performer at a local theater, Barry's drag persona, Bianca coexists with the person behind the character. Jude references Barry's use of performance by stating that "You could live a life this way, split as long as you knew who was in charge" (Bennett, 145). Here, Bennett encapsulates Barry's ability to switch between his drag persona and personal identity which emphasizes the novel ways in which individuals can navigate and integrate performance into their lives even if it is purely for entertainment purposes which the narrator clarifies as they state that "It was fun because everyone knew it was not real" (Bennett, 124). In contrast, Kennedy lacks the ability to switch between performance and reality as the challenges of authenticity in the face of external influences and falsehoods complicate her sense of self. In the same way that the Southern hospitality myth masked the real events of racism, Kennedy's life as a White woman masked her true ancestral roots. Eventually, Kennedy's performances off-stage began to blur the line between performance and reality, which is explained as Ohad Reznick suggests that "Through the theme of acting, Bennett's novel unsettles the line between personality and persona, an assumed racial identity, and a given one, thus challenging racialized perceptions of African Americans" (271). In the same way that Kennedy's acting extended beyond racial lines, her performances extended beyond the bounds of her real

life. The narrator further clarifies that Kennedy “didn't know what to do with the rest. All those stories she knew were fiction, so she began to create new ones... She was always inventing her life” (Bennett, 336). Since Kennedy did not know her family history, she was unable to maintain a consistent identity.

When Jude explains that if Stella is Black then so is she, Kennedy states that she is not in fact a Negro, which is exemplified through her thoughts: “It wasn't a race thing. She just hated the idea of anyone telling her who she had to be” (Bennett, 333). Kennedy's refusal to be defined by others exemplifies her White entitlement. Although not adhering to the Southern custom of hospitality, the hostile acts of omitting and falsifying Kennedy's past prevented her from connecting with her authentic self or her genuine nature unencumbered by societal expectations, external influences, or pretenses, that would enable her to embrace her own values, beliefs and desires reflected by an internal identity that would not conflict with her external portrayal of herself. Hindering her connection to her authentic self also contributed to Kennedy's acquisition of White entitlement and privilege, as evidenced by her denial of her heritage and her assertion of refusing to be defined by others. The desire not to be defined by others can emerge as a form of asserting one's autonomy and resisting attempts to classify or constrain them based on racial stereotypes or expectations. The resistance is a response to a societal landscape that historically has imposed definitions and expectations on people of color, while those with White privilege may feel the need to break free from such constraints. Kennedy's entitlement exposes underlying concepts of power dynamics, identity, and the struggle for autonomy and authenticity in a world where racial and cultural expectation often shape how individuals are perceived and treated. The relationship between societal and social authorities and the construction of identity becomes apparent as Jones implies that “It also illuminates the power of the social narrative of white

superiority to construct identity and the knowledge of mixed ancestry to complicate definitions of the self (222). What is important to note here is that the social narrative does impact identity construction, yet it does not have to define it according to Bennett. In her character, Kennedy, Bennett suggests that even when the social narrative and even past evidence of racial heritage impact identity, one should have the right not to adhere to those labels.

In contrast, Bennett defines transition as the space between performance or pretending and total transformation within her character Reese. Reese is Jude's love interest who transitioned on the road from El Dorado, Arkansas. While Reese made excuses for his desire to transition "the truth was that he'd always been Reese. By Tuscan, it was Terese who felt like a costume" (Bennett, 115). As Reese physically escaped the confines of the South he was confronted with alternative perspectives, ideologies, and opportunities for personal growth. The transition allowed him to break free from the social and societal constraints of his past enabling him to explore uncharted territories both externally and internally. Reese's journey emphasizes the common experiences of individuals who feel compelled to hide their true selves as a means to placate those around them and to protect themselves from emotional and physical harm. Evidence supporting the potential physical danger that transgender people face can be found in Rebecca Stotzer's sociological study which concludes that "Transgender people appear to be victimized by strangers and people they know, including their families and loved ones, with equal frequency" (178). Despite the fear of public ridicule or violence, Reese's journey to discover his authentic self demonstrates his determination to be honest with himself and others. His commitment to honesty serves as a counterexample of how White dishonesty obscures the truth, hindering genuine connections within interpersonal relationships. In essence, Reese is used as an example of someone who is attempting to bridge the gap between their current self and

their idealized version of themselves, suggesting that they are amid transition with the final destination being transformation.

While Reese transitions to find his self-autonomy, Kennedy does not change physically or mentally yet her performance allows her to change her public perception; therefore, solidifying her new and temporary identity. While I partly agree with Maas Rue's assumption that "Kennedy's character serves the purpose of allegorizing the act of passing through an actress-on-stage metaphor," I do not concur that "Disappearing into someone else is exactly what Stella does using what cannot be mistaken as anything but trained and highly crafted performativity" (24). I assert that it is not performance, but transformation that Stella embodies because she does not simply disappear into someone else as Kennedy does when she performs, rather Stella transforms into one identity that she upholds inscrutably throughout the entire novel. Reznick's characterization of performance is a bit clearer when he writes, "Employing the themes of racial passing and performance, *The Vanishing Half* raises questions about the difference between acting and being authentic, challenging the idea of a real self" (271). While Kennedy's performance allows her to switch to Kennedy and back time and time again, Stella only remains Stella. This difference is clear when Jude confronts Stella outside the theater and Stella replies, "'It's too much', she said. 'I can't go back through that door. It's another life, you understand?'" (Bennett, 280). This is no longer an act for Stella as she has completed her transformation and is unable to deviate from the path she has chosen. Her transformation becomes more apparent as Bennett writes, "How she'd pretended to be someone else because she needed a job, and after a while, pretending became reality. She could tell the truth, she thought, but there was no single truth anymore. She'd lived a life split between two women-each real, each alive" (292).

This transformation is almost a game to Stella at first, but once she catches the eye of her future husband and current boss, Blake Sanders, things quickly begin to change. Bennett does clarify that even though Stella's outlooks begin to change she questioned, "But what had changed about her? Nothing, really. She hadn't adopted a disguise or even a new name. She'd walked in a colored girl and left a white one. She had become white only because everyone thought she was" (211). While Jones surmises that "the ethnic (and racial) ancestry is not always written on the body," I assert that Stella simply allowed herself to be defined by those around her (228). Stella allows society to dictate her race based on what they saw physically and only assumed the position of White to obtain basic human rights and freedoms. The process of adapting to new environments and confronting the reality that she would be forced to deal with racial prejudices if she were to remain a Black woman compelled her to reassess her beliefs and redefine her identity. Her initial dishonesty became her truth and her fear of others discovering her secret prompted new ways for her to protect her White reputation. Her need or desire to protect her White reputation exposes the Southern customs and values that are ingrained within her psyche and are sustained and expressed through her interactions with others. As another example of how Stella's dishonesty became her truth after her transformation, Bennett juxtaposes how history can be remembered when Jude addresses how fiction can be transformed into historical "fact" when she asserts that "Like all colonizers, the conquistadors wrote their fiction into reality, their myths transforming into history" (150). As an ingrained social construct, Southern hospitality is intertwined with Stella's decisions and her transformation is not just about geographical relocations but rather about the mental and emotional metamorphosis as she fights with those ingrained notions of White superiority, solidarity, and hostility.

4.2 The Pretense of Victimhood, Hospitality, and Allyship

Stella's first instance of Southern hostility arises when she attends a neighborhood meeting with her husband where everyone is informed that a Black family (the Walkers), Reginald and Loretta and their daughter Cindy, are attempting to move into their neighborhood and intend on enrolling their daughter in the local school. Although no longer in the South physically, this moment is where the White "victim" trope manifests through Stella and the community members. Sentiments such as, "What was the purpose of having an association if not to stop undesirables from moving in, if not to ensure the neighborhood exists precisely as the neighbors wished?" were expressed at this meeting (Bennett, 167). Each of the White citizens play the victims. They engage with the idea that Black people moving into the neighborhood is negatively impacting them and they are the ones who will suffer for it, rather than be socially or monetarily. In this context racism manifests as exudes from the community members' comments as Hephzibah Strmic-Pawl points out that, "Racism derives from white supremacy, the intertwined systems, institutions, and ideologies that operate to maintain the racial order whereby those deemed White are the benefactors" (7). This quote illustrates the manifestation of racism that is rooted in the perpetuation of White solidarity, involving interconnected systems and ideologies that enact hostility in order to uphold the racial hierarchy where Whites receive privileged benefits.

Despite both Stella and the other White neighbors' aversion to the Walkers, they still moved in across the street from Stella. Their proximity enables the daughters of the two families, Kennedy and Cindy, to connect and one day when Stella sees the two girls playing together, she creates a public outburst. Later that night Loretta drops off Kennedy's doll that she had left behind during the altercation, and an ashamed Stella feels obligated to right her wrong. Again,

hospitality, although not confined to the Southern region, exudes from Stella's past of learned Southern etiquette and within this social interaction where Stella feels obligated to repay Loretta's decency of bringing the doll back, yet Bennett masterfully makes a distinction. Stella clarifies that "Hospitality wasn't the same as friendliness, and if anyone asked, she would say that she'd been raised to be hospitable. Nothing more, nothing less. One lemon cake for her peace of mind felt like an easy trade" (Bennett, 188). The distinction made by Bennett suggests that Stella sees hospitality as a structured concept whereby friendliness may connote a genuine warmth, hospitality is a practiced and learned behavior tied to societal or cultural expectations. The transactional or obligatory exchange that occurs, symbolized by the lemon cake, is not about making the Walkers feel welcome in a new place but rather about maintaining Stella's own sense of well-being or peace of mind. In fact, when Loretta offers Stella a drink, she declines by saying, "I couldn't, I just wanted to stop by and—well, welcome you all to the neighborhood" (Bennett, 189). After which Stella immediately stutters through an apology for the earlier incident, which was her goal, assuaging her guilt. Even though Stella's gesture was meant to make herself feel better, Loretta accepts her gift and welcomes her openly into her home, illustrating the portrayal of White and Black hospitality. While Stella's hospitality extended to Loretta possessed and underlying motive, Loretta's willingness to allow Stella into her home after her audacious outburst suggests authenticity. Here, while not meant to be generalized or an oversimplification of the complex reality of hospitality, White hospitality seems to reflect a strong sense of communal identity where elaborate meals, well-maintained homes, and a comfortable atmosphere signify one's status, Black hospitality is expressed in communal spirit with an emphasis on shared resources of meals, music, and time that foster ideals of unity and belonging.

4.3 White Hospitality, Black Exclusion, and Dishonesty

However, the Christmas party held at the Sanders' home, marked by Stella's dishonesty about her friendship with Loretta and her exclusion of the Walkers, emphasizes the intricacies within these broad categories and highlights the potential for betrayal within these shared notions of hospitality. Stella continues to lie about her and Loretta's relationship when she states that "She is not my friend," although she has confided in Loretta, expressing intimate details about her hopes and dreams (Bennett, 217). Within this scene, the rules of Southern hospitality are at play as the Black strangers are not included in the festivities, yet the White hosts and guests are afforded this luxury. Furthermore, Stella participates in Southern hostility as a White woman who pretends to be an ally to the Black neighbor and ultimately denies this behavior when in public. Stella's choices and behavior are motivated by her desire to protect her White reputation as Wyatt-Brown clarifies that "hospitality, brought the code of honor into very serious play because of its intimate connection with both personal and group status, which depended so largely upon public perceptions" (344). The fear of tarnishing her reputation accompanied by racial bias and exclusion reinforces the White Southern social customs and values she acquired while living in the South.

In the following weeks, Stella does not tell the truth about her relationship with Loretta and the Walkers are harassed by other members of the community. The best characterization of the neighborhood's attitudes towards Blacks is captured when Bennett writes, "these were fine people, good people, who donated to charities and winced at newsreels of southern sheriffs swinging Billy clubs that colored college students" (179). While characterizing their non-violent attitudes and "progressive" ideals such as sharing common beliefs with Martin Luther King, the people of this neighborhood still actively intimidated and harassed a Black family. Bennett states

that even though they held these beliefs about King, “they still wouldn't have allowed that man to move into their neighborhood” (179). It is important to point out that the exclusionary tactics did include acts of violence and that while those acts were despicable, no one stood up to defend the family. In fact, Blake, Stella’s husband declares that “This is Brentwood, not Mississippi, Blake said. Tossing bricks through windows seems like something the gap-toothed trash did” (Bennett, 225). Although Blake does say something about the injustices the Walkers were facing, he says this in the privacy of his own home, elucidating the complicity of White solidarity. Due to their feigned allyship Blake and the community members never make an effort to welcome the Walkers and ultimately drive them away with their hostile acts, further insinuating that intentional and complicit acts of hostility, yet Stella used her hospitality as a façade to mask her acts of hostility against Loretta in hopes of maintaining her reputation.

4.4 White Hospitality and Reputation Preservation

Another instance that hospitality and Stella’s desire to protect her reputation intersect is at a party in Beverly Hills where Jude sees her for the first time. Jude is working the party and here, again the Black person is designated as help or stranger, while the White hosts please their White guests exploiting Black labor. Once Jude sees Stella, she drops a bottle of wine where she is then kicked out of the party and fired from her job. Szczesiul’s insight that “we should remember that the politics of hospitality is concerned with how we define the stranger or foreigner-and how we consequently treat them” (38) is particularly relevant here. Jude’s expulsion and subsequent termination is a harsh consequence of her actions, which highlights the relationship between defining strangers within social settings and assessing how actions may be fueled by judgements or preconceived prejudices, revealing the profound impact that these notions have personal and professional repercussions. While Jude noticed Stella, Stella did not see her as she was more

focused on fulfilling her wifely duty of presenting a unified familial front to Blake's partners, which illustrates the manifestation of hospitality hierarchies. Bennett describes the family dynamic when she writes, "One big happy family-it mattered to the rest of the partners. Blake was a marketing man who understood the value of his own brand, Stella and Kennedy merely an extension of it. So she'd agreed to go to that party" (247). This moment exemplifies the values and structures associated with hospitality where women were expected to be the dutiful wife and mother. The Southern hospitality custom dictated as Jones posits that "White plantation society, because of its economic and social dominance, established conventions of behavior for women, both white and black" (70). The instructed behavior of women is another aspect that often hinders Black women from assessing and constructing their identities.

The partners and other party goers expected to see the White family as a dominant unit, further emphasizing the perception of reputation and the rhetoric of Southern hospitality, where White men would use parties or social gatherings to display their status to society. Beata Zawadka suggests that "once patriarchy allowed the male to assume the economic, legal and moral responsibility for his household members, it at once suggested that he was the guardian of both the public and the private spheres of southern life, thus furthering his gender mastery as their superior, binding power" (235). Going deeper into Stella and Blake's marriage there is still the imbalance of power that first exhibited itself in their initial relationship of boss and secretary, which is exemplified when "Blake suggested she take a class, which he later regretted because she brought it up each time he complained about her working" (Bennett, 249). Stella takes a mathematics class at the Santa Monica Community College where she meets a feminist activist, Peggy Davis. Blake's aversion to feminist politics and Peggy becomes apparent as Bennett writes, "'She's not like you,' he said. 'You have family. Obligations. She just has her politics'"

(250). Blake designates what he believes Stella's priorities *should be*, while at the same time diminishing her thoughts and desires. The obligatory exchange of hospitality, while not occurring between guest and host, is exemplified in the power imbalance between Blake and Stella.

The Vanishing Half by Brit Bennett illustrates how the coping mechanisms of performance, transition, and transformation often involves the Southern hospitality aspects of White entitlement, dishonesty, and maintained reputation that work to hinder the construction of identity for Black individuals. This intricate connection demonstrates how White entitlement, dishonesty, reputation contribute to hostility, which inhibits Black identity construction and navigates societal expectations and racial dynamics within the context of the Southern social custom. Bennett's work not only critiques how White displays of hospitality often have obligatory pretense but also exhibit underlying hostile motivations that ultimately complicate identity construction for Black people. The Southern narrative, with its façade of politeness and welcoming nature, reveals the need for a more novel understanding of hospitality—one which acknowledges the complexities, confronts underlying hostilities, and paves the way for more genuine connections and relationships.

5 CONCLUSION

Both *Blues for Mister Charlie* by James Baldwin and *The Vanishing half* by Brit Bennett demonstrate how literary works counteract racist myths such as Southern hospitality and exposes the use of Southern hostility that perpetuate the continuation of racism, diminishing the events of the past, and neglecting the Black burden of identity construction. To combat the dispersion of harmful myths and racist doctrine, the discourse and enactment of Southern hospitality must steer away from depictions of White “victims” and “allies” and move toward lessening the burden for those who were impacted by or suffered from Southern hostility. Rather than looking at it from the perspective that White people should be held accountable, look at it from the viewpoint that all Americans should be held responsible for the manifestation of racist systems, institutions, and doctrine that arose from the creation of slavery, segregation, and discrimination that still impact people of color today. Only by acknowledging the ways in which these false narratives continue to spread harmful misinformation that initiates the self-deception for some arbitrators of Southern hospitality, can we learn how to mend consequences that arise from the structural racism present in American society. For instance, Jones explains how structural racism impacts secondary education when she states that “Because black people outnumbered whites in many voting precincts in the South, whites were determined both to keep their political power by discouraging black voters and to maintain social segregation, which led to the formation of private all white academies throughout the South, many of which exist today” (21).

In observing the creation of White-only academies and the myriad of other examples that illustrate the persistent impacts of racism on African Americans, McCarthy and Yancey’s call for systemic change resonates profoundly, as they clarify that “if empirical evidence supports an alternative description and explanation of racial differences in self-esteem, then institutional

change rather than individual psychiatric or welfare services should be the primary focus of public policy aimed at amelioration of the consequences of racism” (669). Addressing the consequences of racism and hostile acts demands a shift from individual based interventions to a more comprehensive and cohesive institutional reform of the legal system and society as a whole. In addition, McCarthy and Yancey highlight the requirement not only for systemic change but also for personal introspection. Genuine connections between White and Black people are the key to fostering understanding, empathy, and actions of true hospitality. It should no longer be acceptable for insincere acts of hospitality and feigned White allies or victims to conceal racist inclinations behind a disguise of agreement or advocacy for Black equality. As Southern hospitality can be used as a mask for a historically racist society, people who claim to advocate for Black enrichment and empowerment must scrutinize their actions, ensuring that they genuinely contribute to the dismantlement of systemic racism.

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