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Introduction: Radical hospitality?

Cecilia Canziani & Louise Garrett

The welcome orients, it turns the *topos* of an opening of the door and of the threshold toward the other.⁹¹

The concept of a ‘radical’ hospitality represents a contentious – and hopeful – rethinking of the ways in which relations between hosts and (unexpected) guests to homes, places, cities, nations or continents are conceptualized and practiced. In the current of numerous manifestations of devastating politics of exclusion being administered globally, represented by (say) the rise of populist political movements across Europe, the ongoing Mediterranean crisis, the implementation of the UK Home Office’s hostile environment for immigration, or the Trump administration’s zero tolerance immigration policies, such hopefulness proposes a radical rethinking of the ways in which political space between hosts and guests is activated and negotiated. In today’s generally *inhospitable* environment – a space characterized by the blatant suppression of minority rights – addressing the complex and deeply problematic question: ‘How do we act hospitably now?’ strikes us as particularly urgent – both in terms of potency and potentiality.

This question stems from a desire to create dialogues between theoretical and practical applications of hospitality in order to try to think through a politics of space that is open to and oriented by the agency of the *étranger* (foreigner, stranger) – a figure that presupposes (rather than being an exception to) all social relations.⁹² Regarding

⁹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 54.

⁹² Cf. Simmel’s claim that ‘to be a stranger is naturally a very positive relation; ... The stranger, like the poor and like sundry ‘inner enemies,’ is an element of the group itself. His position as a full-fledged member involves both being outside it and confronting it.’ Georg Simmel, “The Stranger” (1908) in *On Individuality and*

such a terrain appeals to a recognition of the iniquities of dispossession, precarity, dislocation, exclusion and myriad degradations that the current hardening of borders represents (shored up by malignant political rhetoric that imagines ‘marauding’ immigrants as invaders, or as a form of natural disaster – a ‘tidal wave,’ a ‘flood’ – or as insects or parasites ‘swarming’ across newly reinforced sovereign borders).⁹³ Theorizing hospitality (without forgetting its etymological links to hostility)⁹⁴ and thinking about the highly ambiguous, uneven, often ambivalent and potentially violent relations between hosts and guests may not suggest the most straightforward route towards a critique of the global right to civic and public space. Yet engaging with questions of hospitality offers a useful way of thinking alternatively about the welcoming, marginalization or exclusion of strangers and the dispossessed by city, state and global administrations – by embedding such administered politics of space within a broader ethico-political responsibility.

The Radical Hospitality stream at the 2017 London Conference in Critical Thought (LCCT) provided a platform for interdisciplinary approaches towards interrogating the antinomies of hospitality as a vehicle for thinking through theories and practices of spatial politics in contemporary cultural contexts. The point of departure was Jacques Derrida’s political analyses, in a sequence of seminars from the late 1990s,⁹⁵ in which he reads hospitality as an aporetic space between the principles of unconditional or absolute hospitality – the principle of

Social Forms: Selected Writings, edited by Donald N. Levine (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 143-44.

⁹³ A brief but insightful analysis of this form of toxic language in relation to immigration can be found in David Shariatmadari, “Swarms, floods and marauders: the toxic metaphors of the migration debate,” *Guardian*, August 10, 2015: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/10/migration-debate-metaphors-swarms-floods-marauders-migrants>, accessed 22 September 2018.

⁹⁴ For a reading of the troubling (and troubled) relationship between hospitality and hostility, see Jacques Derrida, “Hostipitality,” *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 5, no. 3 (2000): 3-18, DOI: 10.1080/09697250020034706.

⁹⁵ Key publications related to this topic include: Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London and New York: Verso, 1997); *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas; On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to Respond* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000).

allowing whomever or whatever enters one's domain without reservations or calculations – and conditional hospitality – the laws required to control and protect 'home.' Rather than setting these principles of hospitality as mutually exclusive forces, Derrida argues for an irreducible relation between the two. This manifestation of undecidability as a politicized concept was crucial to Derrida's late writings and, in this context, allows for a fruitful tension within the politics and ethics of hospitality as well as between theory and practice.⁹⁶

Derrida understood hospitality as an interrogative term to consider both public space as a bounded zone, in which the stranger/foreigner (*étranger*) is subject to the codes, rules and regulations of its host (home, city or state), and the common right of any stranger to any space; that is, the ethical imperative that the host receives whatever and whomever enters its domain. The provisionality of this aporetic space between conditional and unconditional hospitality appeals to a radical rethinking of hospitality in relation to contemporary conditions determined by exclusionary premises of legally mandated, state-regulated hospitality in the form of (say) border control and deportation policies or the conditions of refuge and the illegal detention of asylum seekers. How might actual issues of space and resource allocation, controls on free movement and rights, and imposed definitions of a guest's identity and status be reoriented by thinking through the ethical imperative of unconditional hospitality?

The radical basis of Derrida's interpretation calls for the hyperbolic, unlimited ethics of (unconditional) hospitality to orient the (conditional) realm of legislation operating between hosts and guests, challenging the more conventional situation in which the unconditional is contained or guarded by the precepts of conditional hospitality. Radically re-orienting the conditional identity of hospitality, which Derrida summarises as the requirements for 'a

⁹⁶ Derrida, "Hostipitality." Another significant work in the context of Derrida's late political writings is *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). For a reading of the origins of 'undecidability' in Derrida's writing, see David Bates, "Crisis Between the Wards: Derrida and the Origins of Undecidability," *Representations*, 90, no. 1 (2005): 1-27.

police inquisition, a registration of information, or a straightforward frontier control,' invokes threshold politics as an 'unstable place of strategy and decision.' This, Derrida writes, is '[a] difference both subtle and fundamental, a question that arises on the threshold of 'home,' and on the threshold between two inflections.' For Derrida, this is an absolute principle: 'An art and a poetics, but an entire politics depends on it, an entire ethics is decided by it.'⁹⁷

The Radical Hospitality stream was part of an ongoing curatorial project investigating current research and practice which looks particularly at art and architecture as practices of encounter, sociality and spatiality. This project aims to illuminate, critically scope and expand concepts of hospitality when considered in relation to space, mobility, migration, refuge, sanctuary, cosmopolitanism, travel, translation and related phenomena. The six sessions in the 2017 LCCT conference offered a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives from academics in the fields of philosophy, history, religion, law, politics and linguistics alongside practitioners including artists and architects. Opening up this discussion to authors from a variety of different disciplines offered the beginnings of a constellation of ideas allied to the ethical (im)possibilities of hospitality, and the way this concept inscribes interdisciplinary modes of enquiry into spatial and threshold politics. This current collection draws out a small selection of these diverse strands to create a dialogue between theoretical and practical applications of Derrida's interpretation of the antinomies of hospitality.

The collection begins with Andreas Michel's reading of Derrida through Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala's 2011 book *Hermeneutic Communism*,⁹⁸ which argues for a radical politics originating from the margins, based on the care for the weak. Vattimo and Zabala's proposition of a 'twisting' (*Verwindung*) of democratic foundations *from the margins*, speaks to Derrida's response to the (im)possibility of hospitality in its 'pure and hyperbolic' dimension 'in whose name we should always invent the best dispositions, the least bad conditions,

⁹⁷ Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Hospitality," in *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 66-7.

⁹⁸ Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism from Heidegger to Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

the most just legislation.⁹⁹ This frames the question of hospitality as a radical demand for justice and rights for an international precariat marginalized by economic and social conditions that equally sidelines migrants, refugees, colonized subjects and indigenous peoples. Also, considering hospitality as a catalyst for a plurality of interpretations, following the way ‘hermeneutic communism’ is understood by Vattimo and Zabala, suggests a way of thinking about a hermeneutics of hospitality as necessary political action in a radical sense. Rather than conserving or protecting the status quo – for example, already established hierarchies between hosts and guests – hospitality as a hermeneutic may be thought of as a productive resistance to conventional principles and categories in which the door is not shut on ‘what cannot be calculated, meaning the future and the foreigner.’¹⁰⁰ Recalling the appeal to hope invoked earlier in this introduction, Michel characterises Vattimo and Zabala’s radical proposal as based on a common ideal of basic human solidarity and love.

Such a reading of hospitality as a politics of resistance provides a basis for the discussion between Shaimaa Abdelkarim and Alessandra Ferrini, which elaborates on their respective papers presented at LCCT 2017. The conversation stemmed from a reciprocal interest in the implications and responsibilities involved in presenting their respective research on two specific instances of ‘the future and the foreigner’ – the 2011 uprising in Tahrir Square in Egypt, which unseated President Hosni Mubarak on 11 February of that year (Abdelkarim), and the plight of agricultural workers in southern Italy subject to the gangmaster system (Ferrini). Ferrini’s film *Radio Ghetto Relay* draws on material from the radio station Radio Ghetto, Voci Libere (Radio Ghetto, Free Voices), which was established to give voice to the inhabitants of the Gran Ghetto in Rignano Garganico, near Foggia (Puglia, Italy). These inhabitants were migrant workers (some of them trafficked) who have been exploited by gangmasters operating on behalf of the tomato industry (and other agricultural sectors) in Italy. The radio station was designed to offer a vehicle for Gran Ghetto residents to communicate their situation and grievances in public, but in such a way that circumvented and resisted their own

⁹⁹ Jacques Derrida, “The Principle of Hospitality,” 67.

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Derrida, “The Principle of Hospitality,” 67.

subjection to economic exploitation. *Radio Ghetto*, which Ferrini's film draws from, can be considered a practical response to the demand for a politics of the margins, articulated in Michel's paper. Ferrini and Abdelkarim discuss how they situate themselves as researchers in relation to their subjects, characterizing this relation as a negotiable, unstable space between hosts and guests. Taking Derrida as a lead, Ferrini and Abdelkarim think through the responsibility researchers hold towards marginalized subjects and narratives. This is relevant to both a hermeneutical methodology based on a 'care for the weak' and Derrida's motivation to disrupt or resist (to deconstruct) power structures based on a prescribed order of foundational thinking. In the conversation between the two authors, *Radio Ghetto* and *Tahrir* are considered as what Abdelkarim describes as 'spaces of negotiation in which the roles of guest and host are constantly questioned and redefined': a space of undecidability between the force of law and the right to justice.¹⁰¹ The question they share in relation to their respective (ongoing) research is how to re-enact the potential of these spaces of negotiation as ongoing – and irrepressible – archives of resistance in the present.

A very different space for negotiation is considered in the final paper by museologist and cultural scientist Luise Reistätter. In her research, threshold politics is positioned in relation to a symbolic realm of exclusionary, hierarchical power and knowledge: the museum. Reistätter presents the case study of *Say it Simple. Say it Out Loud*: an easy-to-read wall text evaluation and language learning project developed by the Salzburg Museum and the University of Salzburg. The project was designed to develop the museum's educational offering by attempting to give agency to marginalized voices. By addressing the roots of language as the 'border guard' of the museum (considered as a hegemonic discursive space), the project suggests a basic, or radical, shift in how the museum might be 'read' and actively interpreted by migrant and marginalized voices. This represents a basic principle of hospitality in which language as a vehicle for communicating across cultural difference is opened up and made more flexible, facilitating a shift from the traditional

¹⁰¹ See Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'" in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 3-67.

authoritative voice of the museum to a more inclusionary space of diverse voices and positions – a space where the co-production of knowledge is proposed as a real possibility. Ideally, this suggests the potentiality of the museum as a host space for the disenfranchised in which access allows for the possibility of parallax views on its conventional representational perspective – a minor gesture towards the unpicking the social fabric drawn tight by the professed guardians of knowledge. In Derrida’s terms, this may be a way of originating an ‘idiom to come.’¹⁰²

Likewise, justice (Derrida says):

...may have an *avenir*, a ‘to come,’ [which is] rigorously distinguish[ed] from the future that can always reproduce the present. [...] Justice remains, is yet, to come, *à venir*, it has an, it is *à-venir*, the very dimension of events irreducibly to come. [...] ‘Perhaps,’ one must always say perhaps for justice.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Derrida uses the phrase “idiom to come” in many of his writings on hospitality, including in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 19.

¹⁰³ Derrida, “Force of Law,” 27.