



NARRATIVE HOSPITALITY

Sigrid Nunez's Poetics of Fragmentation

This paper proposes the notion of “narrative hospitality” for interpreting a particular kind of discontinuous or fragmentary writing, and illustrates this technique with reference to the work of contemporary American author Sigrid Nunez. Arguably, hospitality as a mode of storytelling and as a problem can be found throughout Nunez’s oeuvre, from her 1989 story “Chang” to her latest, “Greensleeves,” published in *The New Yorker* in 2024. The paper opens with a discussion of the aesthetics of fragmentation, based on recent theoretical writings by Vanessa Guignery, Wojciech Drag, and Meritt Moseley. It then goes on to interpret Nunez’s prose as hospitable on the formal level and links the use of fragmentation with the theme of hospitality in “Chang,” “It Will Come Back to You” (2001), *Sempre Susan* (2011), and *The Vulnerables* (2023).

To my best knowledge, the term “narrative hospitality” was first used by Rachel Hollander in 2013 to describe narrative techniques developed by Late Victorian novelists confronted by the “moral and epistemological problem of the relationship between self and other,” as an alternative to the outworn sentimental paradigm focused on sympathy (2). Referring to the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas and Jacques Derrida on the self’s otherness and the ethics of hospitality, Hollander argues that “narrative hospitality [...] intervenes in the dominant late nineteenth-century political debates about colonialism, nationalism, and women’s rights, as literary texts may function as singular experiences that inspire an ethical response” (11).

Not unlike the Late Victorians, Nunez invites an ethical rather than a sentimental response by choosing to examine in minute detail various intersecting axes of othering, such as age, race, gender,

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and species. The prose of Charles Dickens, whose “beauty and precision” she admired as a child, alongside its “concern for social justice, and the compassion with which [Dickens] wrote about human suffering,” authorized her to “show the reality of other people, and what those people might be going through—people who were completely different from oneself” (Nunez, “Life” 175). For the purposes of this paper I, therefore, borrow Hollander’s term “narrative hospitality” and extend its meaning to cover Nunez’s original manner of storytelling that is open to interruption by competing stories, voices (both fictional and historical), as well as genres (fiction and nonfiction). Derrida saw the interruption of the self’s monologue as a precondition of hospitality: “One will understand nothing about hospitality if one does not understand what ‘interrupting oneself’ might mean, the interruption of the self by the self as other” (52). Symptomatically, Nunez’s narrators are characteristically open to interruption not just by other voices but also by their own unruly thoughts. Some of her narrators are erudite readers who cite other authors. Some allow unannounced voices to intrude and leave their words without commentary, as if reluctant to infringe on the autonomy of the intruders or confident that the reader will make sense of the intruders’ decontextualized words because the novel supplies a new context.

Hospitality to intruding voices makes Nunez’s fragmentary prose polyphonic but not merely (or not quite) in the Bakhtinian sense of incorporating dialogue and contradictory perspectives. Writing about polyphony in Dostoevsky’s fiction, Mikhail Bakhtin famously remarked that “a character’s word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author’s [...]. It possesses extraordinary independence in the structure of the work; it sounds, as it were, alongside the author’s word and combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of other characters” (Bakhtin 7). Nunez’s narrators can be said to stand “alongside” the intruders who enter their stories, and they are not compelled to suture the fragments into a seamless narrative. However, while Nunez, like Bakhtin, makes ample use of dialogue, she usually filters conversations through the consciousness of a first-person narrator, omitting quotation marks and using reported or free indirect speech, so that the narrator appears to be reconstructing other people’s words from memory. Nunez’s narrators seem open to “the interruption of the self by the self as other” (Derrida 52): in some cases, their past imposes itself—uninvited—on the present; in others, the narrators consciously dredge up scenes from the past to cope with a crisis. Always, the discontinuous text draws attention to the workings of memory. Consequently, Nunez’s storytelling

frustrates the reader's desire for immersion in a seamless narrative and is a source of constant surprise.

NUNEZ'S POETICS OF FRAGMENTATION

"Essentially all fictions are fragmentary in some real sense, the differences among them arising from the *degree* of fragmentation" (Moseley 16, emphasis in the original). Among the key features of fragmentary writing, Wojciech Drąg lists heteroglossia, nonlinearity, disregard of causality, absence of chronology, repetitions, citations, and metatextuality, all of which are more or less pronounced in Nunez's work. Significantly for this paper, Drąg attributes a democratic impulse to fragmentary writing ("Heteroglossia" 61–62). Elsewhere, he points to "the egalitarian, antihierarchical structure of collage" (*Collage* 20). Similarly, Merritt Moseley finds "an ethical dimension" in fragmentary or polyphonic writing, "because of its effort to embrace a multitude of lives, to give voice and dignity to a diversity of characters." But he cautions critics against unduly celebrating fragmentation: "Whether this empathic, democratic stance is a dominant trait of the fiction of our times is debatable" (Moseley 31). Lance Olsen, in turn, argues that collages are committed to "effacing, or at least deeply and richly complicating, the accepted difference between privileged and subordinate discourses," such as fiction and literary criticism (Olsen, qtd. in *Collage* 20). I want to show that an ethical—or democratic—impulse does, in fact, underlie Nunez's use of fragmentation, and to suggest that another name for that impulse might be narrative hospitality.

Nunez is not an avant-garde experimentalist. Her longer works conform to Julian Barnes's definition of the novel as "an extended piece of prose, largely fictional, which is planned and executed as a whole piece" (Barnes qtd. in Sexton 42). Those of her narratives that are composed of disparate fragments like collages, or braided out of separate thematic and generic strands,¹ are still more or less linear. Yet, as an erudite novelist, Nunez is well aware of fragmentation's potential, and she uses it expertly. In filtering the heterogeneous fragments or strands through a single narrative consciousness, Nunez's prose resembles Virginia Woolf's—a strong early influence on her writing—alongside Elizabeth Hardwick's and W. G. Sebald's writings. Some degree of narrative discontinuity characterizes the prose of these three authors. Nunez studied Woolf's works as an aspiring young writer.

1 In Moseley's taxonomy, the "braid" constitutes one type of fragmentary fiction, next to "bricolage" and "mosaic" (9–11).

She was Hardwick's mentee while studying at Barnard and Columbia (Nunez, *Sempre Susan* 22) around the time when Hardwick published her critically acclaimed fictionalized fragmentary memoir, *Sleepless Nights* (1979), which must have impressed the young Columbia student. Although Nunez explains that because she disliked the fiction of her second mentor, Susan Sontag (*Sempre Susan* 60–67), she “did not trust what [Sontag] had to say about writing” (63) and “rejected most of her advice” (65), though she gratefully accepted Sontag's reading suggestions: “I cannot recall a single book she recommended that I was not glad to have read. One of the last times I saw her it was W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* that [...] would become one of my favorite books” (62). Sebald, too, is a master of discontinuous fiction that draws heavily on historical fact.

Declarations aside, at least one fragmentary work by Sontag, “Project for a Trip to China” (1978), did impact Nunez's prose. The early story “Chang,” a fictionalized portrait of Nunez's Chinese Panamanian father, pieced together out of a handful of memories, is evidently in dialogue with Sontag's “Project,” a whimsical meditation on China, the land where Sontag's father often traveled on business and where he died of tuberculosis.² About Sontag's story, Nunez wrote in 2011, “[b]ecause she barely remembered her father and was able to learn little about him, she had to invent him” (Nunez, *Sempre Susan* 27).³ That is precisely how the narrator of “Chang,” published twenty-two years earlier, describes the problem of recalling her father:

And he was like a character in a story also in the sense that he needed to be invented. The silver dollars saved in a cigar box. *The Reader's Digests* going back to before I was born. The uniforms. The tobacco-mint-rosewater smell. I cannot invent a father out of these. (8)

It is likely that Sontag's “Project,” written in a whimsical style atypical for her oeuvre,⁴ helped Nunez to make the transition from conventional to more experimental prose.

2 For a discussion of the death of Sontag's father when she was five see: Moser 41–43. In “Project for a Trip to China” Sontag refers to this non-event, which her mother did not inform her of for many months (282–83).

3 Another obvious parallel between Sontag's “Project for a Trip to China” and Nunez's “Chang” is the enumeration of Chinese objects which filled Sontag's childhood home (269). Nunez's narrator lists such objects only to observe that, paradoxically, they were absent from hers (“Chang” 7).

4 In her memoir on Sontag, Nunez recalls: “She'd never been the kind of writer who wrote directly out of personal experience. In fact, ‘I'm anti-autobiographical,’ she said” (*Sempre Susan* 27).

Nunez's latest novel, *The Vulnerables*, pays homage to yet another early influence, Joe Brainard's famous experiment in erasing narrative identity, *I Remember* (1975). *The Vulnerables'* narrator uses *I Remember* as a template for one of her chapters in order to overcome writer's block. She also assigns his litany format to her creative writing students, as a warm-up exercise. For Brainard, fragmentation was a way to resist "any form of 'fixing' oneself and confining the variety and randomness of experience to one of the available autobiographical plots" (Drag, "Joe Brainard's *I Remember*" 231). Nunez chose a different path: she rejected the "autobiographical pact" altogether, in favor of "fiction in the guise of autobiography" (*The Vulnerables* 235), often spliced with the essay form.

Consequently, at the end of *The Vulnerables*, she also pays tribute to Woolf, who planned to write an "essay-novel" (*The Years*):

Chapters of fiction alternating with nonfiction chapters, "a terrific affair" that would include, well, everything: "satire, comedy, poetry, narrative [...] history politics, feminism, art, literature—in short, a summing up of all I know, feel, laugh at, despise, like, admire, hate & so on." (Woolf, qtd. in *The Vulnerables* 232–233)

Impossible to execute, this grand project ended up being "split into two separate books," neither of them successful (233), only to be undertaken decades later by Annie Ernaux, and implicitly, by Nunez's narrator, who is seeking a way to resuscitate readers' flagging interest in the novel genre.

In practically all interviews, Nunez insists that she works without plot outlines. Her method is to improvise, writing a few pages at a time and revising them stylistically, but without rearranging the order: "Every single book I've written by putting one foot in front of the other. [...] I find that it works much better for me if I grope my way forward blindly. The less you know about what's going to happen, the more room there is for your imagination. Sticking to an outline would create too many restrictions" (Nunez, qtd. in Haas 157–158).

Nunez's narrators tend to be as open to the intrusion of other voices as they are to the free flow of their own unruly thoughts. If they lose their train of thought due to a distraction, they often return to it elsewhere. If they happen to forget a fact, they make a mental note to check it and supply it several pages later. Not only does this poetics of distraction and digression allow Nunez to render convincingly the state of an agitated, grieving, or aging mind. It also enacts a readiness to entertain contradictory ideas and viewpoints. Her three latest novels, narrated by elderly female authors who resemble Nunez,

methodically develop this poetics. While telling their own stories, these narrators overhear, read, solicit, recall, or are forced to listen to other people's. For example, in one chapter of *The Vulnerables* (2023) the narrator recalls a gathering of old college friends after a funeral. As the women talk, one story interrupts or piggybacks on another till someone remarks, "How did we get from safe words to Mister Rogers?" (Nunez, *The Vulnerables* 50). Since the relevance of these micro-stories competing for the reader's attention may not be immediately apparent, some are quickly forgotten. But this does not worry the narrator, who declares:

Only when I was young did I believe that it was important to remember what happened in every novel I read. Now I know the truth: what matters is what you experience while reading, the states of feeling that the story evokes, the questions that rise to your mind, rather than the fictional events described." (*The Vulnerables* 3)⁵

Embraced by the novels—welcome to stop awhile and think along with Nunez's narrators— is how some readers feel about this literature. *New York Times* reviewer Dwight Garner wrote in 2020: "When I open one of her novels, I almost always know immediately: This is where I want to be" (n.pag.) and in 2023: "I am committed, until one of us dies, to Nunez's novels. [...] They are short [...] good and strong company" (n.pag.). Apparently, it is not so much the novels' subject matter as their hospitality that appeals to Garner.

THE INHOSPITABLE HOME

Nunez's writing is widely recognized for exploring existential themes such as solitude and friendship, mortality and grief, and for her metatextual reflections on reading and writing. But it has not been discussed as a meditation on hospitality, although it often revolves around such questions as: How do we decide who or what is allowed in or kept out of the spaces we inhabit and control? What makes us hospitable, indifferent, or hostile to other beings? Whom do we keep at bay or expel? How hospitable are human homes to animals—dogs, cats, marmosets, parrots—and what does hospitality involve in cross-species relations?

For hospitality to occur, someone who controls a space or certain resources must decide whether to share them with an other. Interest

5 Nunez's understanding of fiction is close to Michel Chabon's in that she cares about feeling texts rather than following plots. Chabon's *Moonglow* (2016) achieves "considerable effects by means of an accumulation of layers of feeling rather than from any sense of one incident leading to another and another" (Kevin Nance, qtd. in Moseley 4).

may be a factor in such decisions. Pierre Bourdieu theorized interest as the motivation to do something that is profitable either in terms of material gain or symbolic capital. Humans never act in a disinterested way, he argued, though their investment in a future benefit may be camouflaged, invisible even to themselves: “Like a good tennis player, one positions oneself not where the ball is but where it will be; one invests oneself not where the profit is, but where it will be” (79). In real life, as in games, when “it is necessary to be ‘disinterested’ in order to succeed” people “can undertake, in a spontaneously disinterested manner, actions in accordance with their interests” (83). By contrast, psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins defined interest as an innate, pre-cognitive affect, a sensory reflex that has nothing to do with calculation. Without interest-excitement motivating the infant’s cognition, there would be neither intellectual development nor creativity, he wrote (185–201). The ability to hold another’s interest and gaze affirms both the child’s and the caregiver’s sense of self-worth. Needless to say, over time, the child develops interests beyond the caregiver’s welcoming face, and those are modified through each experience involving other affects. For instance, interest-excitement may be amplified by enjoyment-joy or extinguished by shame-humiliation and anger-rage (76–77, 361).

Given that interest fosters a stance of openness towards new stimuli, it is not surprising that Nunez’s characters tend to be hospitable to those in whom they are interested and indifferent if not outright hostile towards those who fail to sustain their interest.⁶ In work after work, she returns to the problem of hospitality, creating scenes that beg the question: Is the interest that makes us hospitable to the other a spontaneous affective response (in Tomkinsian affect studies terms) or is it an attitude based on the assessment of potential gain (in Bourdieu’s cultural studies terms)? Almost always the textual evidence is ambivalent.

A closer look at Nunez’s semi-autobiographical writings may help to explain why these interconnected themes matter to her. What we know about the Nunez family comes from passages in her fiction that she has identified as factual. We know that the protagonist of “Chang” is based on her Chinese Panamanian father. Chang enters the United States as an undocumented immigrant and is forced to lie low for years, confined to the New York Chinatown, where he mostly speaks Chinese. To earn his citizenship, in other words, to earn the right to American hospitality, he enlists in the military during World War II and fights

6 These affective mechanisms are foregrounded in the novel *For Rouenna*, discussed in Ferens, “Belated interest: Reading the fiction of Sigrid Nunez through Silvan Tomkins’s Affect Theory” (2016).

in Europe. But upon his return to New York City with a German wife and two children, this American citizen finds himself unwelcome in his own home—a constant disappointment to his wife, who apparently expected greater upward mobility. Their children grow up witnessing constant hostility at home—a place that ought to be a refuge from the outside world. “Chang” is a record of domestic strife occasionally bordering on violence. Nunez is thus well aware of the US politics of in/hospitality, particularly towards immigrants of color, but she prefers to examine this problem on the level of interpersonal or cross-species rather than political relations.

“Chang” is a carefully crafted collage of the narrator’s memories of her father, whom she barely knew, though they lived under the same roof until she went away to college. Initially, she recalls scenes that illustrate the father’s apparent lack of interest in his daughters, as well as the conflict between her parents, the father either being absent or himself the cause of discord, which indirectly affects the children.

Her English keeps getting better, making his seem worse and worse. He is hardly home, yet my memory is of constant fighting. Not much vocabulary needed to wound.

“Stupid woman. Crazy lady. Talk, talk, talk, talk—never say nothing!”

“I should have married Rudolf!”

Once, she spat in his face. Another time, she picked up a bread knife and he had to struggle to get it away from her.

They slept in separate beds. (“Chang” 7)

It is the mother who wins the war for territorial control. In one passage, the apartment is described as devoid of all traces of the father’s Chineseness:

In our house there were no Chinese things. No objects made of bamboo or jade. No lacquer boxes. No painted scrolls or fans. No calligraphy. No embroidered silks. No Buddhas. No chopsticks among the silverware, no rice bowls or tea sets. No Chinese tea, no ginseng or soy sauce in the cupboards. My father was the only Chinese thing, sitting like a Buddha himself among the Hummels and cuckoo clocks and pictures of alpine landscapes. My mother thought of the house as hers, spoke of her curtains, her floors (often in warning: “Don’t scuff up my floors!”). (7)

Unwelcome is also the Chinese food the father attempts to bring home from the restaurants where he waits tables:

red sausage with specks of fat like teeth embedded in it, dried fish, buns filled with bean paste which he cracked us up by calling Chinese pee-nus butter. My mother would not touch any of it. (“God knows what it really is.”) We kids

clamored for a taste and when we didn't like it my father got angry. ("You know how he was with that chip on his shoulder. He took it personally. He was insulted.") (7)

The "us" who share a joke at the father's expense are his daughters. Throughout the story, the mother's voiceover, with or without parentheses, pierces the reconstructed scenes and interprets the figure of the incomprehensible and mostly silent father for the children. "He never would talk about himself much, you know. That was his way. He never really had much to say, in general. Silence was golden. It was a cultural thing, I think.' (My mother.)" ("Chang 6). "His inobservance was the family's biggest joke. My mother would give herself or one of us a new hairdo and say, 'Now watch: your father won't even notice,' and she was right" (8).

Siding with the articulate mother, the narrator, as a girl, loses interest in her father. "If it ever occurred to me that my father was getting old, that he was exhausted, that his health was failing, I don't remember it" (7). Uninteresting to his family, except as a breadwinner, the father recedes into the background, a fixture, inanimate, "like a figure in a glass case. That was not the face of someone thinking, feeling, or even daydreaming. It was a clay face, still waiting to receive the breath of life" (8). It is only years later, on encountering "the 'little man' of Russian literature," that the narrator becomes curious about him. "A new possibility presented itself: my father not as one who would not speak but as one to whom no one would listen" (8). But by this time, he is already dead, and "whatever there had been in the way of private documents or papers (and there must have been some) had disappeared." (8)

Towards the end of the story, a litany of voices is introduced with the words "Let others speak." Surprisingly, this section overflows with images, tastes, and sounds of hospitality in Germany under US occupation, where the narrator's parents met.

"Before the occupation no one in this town had ever seen an Oriental or a Negro." (My grandmother.)

"He never ate much, he didn't want you to cook for him, but he liked German beer. He brought cigarettes for everyone. We gave him schnapps. He played us the cowboy songs" (Frau Schweitzer.). (9)

Although on the surface it is the conquered Germans who play the role of gracious hosts, in occupied Germany, it was actually the Allied soldiers who played host when they distributed UNRA provisions. As one German beneficiary of this benevolence recalls in a conversation with the narrator:

"Some of those soldiers were really enjoying it, they wanted nothing better than to see us grovel. [...] But [your father] felt sorry for us. He tried to help. And not just our family but the neighbors, too. He gave us money. His wallet was always out. And he was always bringing stuff from the base, like coffee and chocolate—things you could never get. And even after he went back to the States he sent packages. Not just to us but to all the people he got to know here. Frau Meyer. The Schweitzers. They still talk about that" (My grandmother).(9)

Like a good host, the narrator's father also provides entertainment for the German civilians: "Yes, of course I remember. It was Hank Williams. He played those records over and over. Hillbilly music. I thought I'd go mad.' (My mother)" (9). The story ends with a list of Hank Williams's song titles that reveal Chang's predilection for country music about (unreciprocated) love: "Lovesick Blues. Why Don't You Love Me Like You Used To Do. Your Cheatin' Heart" (9).

What this densely written, fragmentary narrative suggests is that Chang was welcomed by the German families, and he reciprocated in kind. Was the German hospitality the effect of free coffee, chocolate, and the uniform of a victorious army? Did the uniform eclipse his mixed race, or did the Germans, unused to seeing people of Asian descent, simply fail to recognize this mixed-race man as anything other than white? Did they succumb to the charm of Hank Williams's country and western music, through which Chang communicated with his hosts? This is never explained. What we do learn is that once he takes off the military uniform and puts on the "dark pants, white jacket and black bow tie" of the Chinatown waiter (8), his wife loses interest in the "Chinatown Chang" (7) and the hospitality ends. Although husband and wife are both disadvantaged as immigrants, the racial hierarchy that splits the society at large is reenacted in the home, and the mixed-race children are caught in the crossfire. "Outbursts triggered by his gambling, his English, his superstition against making a will. Once started, she could not stop herself. Her rage tore like a cyclone through the house. Afterward we would all sit in a kind of stupor in which even the cat and inanimate things seemed to share" (Nunez, "Christa" 36).

THE VULNERABLE GUEST

That children may feel unwelcome in their birth family is a recurrent theme in Nunez's fiction (*A Feather, Naked Sleeper, The Last of Her Kind, Salvation City, The Vulnerables*), as is the theme of children breaking the ties with their parents and choosing surrogate homes (for instance, in *The Last of Her Kind* and *What Are You Going Through*). Away from

home, children learn that hospitality may be extended gratuitously, with ulterior motives, or at a high price. One story that weighs up all three possibilities is “It Will Come Back to You” (2021), a tragi-comic stream-of-consciousness narrative in which an aging woman thinks about the loss of memory and hearing in the context of her visits to a “senior housing complex” resident named Gilda (n.pag.). All the characters in this story are hard-of-hearing and have their own strategies for coping with memory loss.

Gilda is “the family friend” that the narrator “sometimes went to live with [as a child] when [her] mother had trouble remembering she had a daughter.” We learn that the childless Gilda welcomed the girl into her home, pampered her, and at one point even suggested she call her “Mom.” “I wanted to look just like Gilda when I grew up. Oh, the marvel of her piled up blonde hair—her termite mound, my mother called it—adorned with a butterfly bow in the front.” Jealous, the mother calls Gilda a “tramp” behind her back and insists the daughter refer to her as “Aunt.”

But before the narrator mentions Gilda and her husband Jack, she takes nine paragraphs to relate in great detail her own complicated medical history, which includes, on the one hand, a diagnosed progressive hearing impairment coupled with occasional pain behind the ears, whose causes remain a mystery, and, on the other, an asymptomatic and “benign” brain tumor “about the size of a chickpea,” accidentally detected in the course of ENT and neurological examinations. Her ENT doctor speculates that the pain “might have been from clenching my teeth in my sleep. [...] It still happens at times, but I’ve learned to ignore it.” Reading through this litany of ailments, the reader is likely to lose interest and treat them as extraneous character description.

“If it was important, it will come back to you. Maybe, maybe not. What I want to know is why so much that is unequivocally *not* important comes back, and why it comes back at the particular moment that it does.” Not only does the narrator seem to have trouble determining the relative importance and accuracy of what she recalls; she also has trouble controlling the emotionally charged “scenes from the past [that] keep flashing through [her] head.” Another psychological glitch that produces narrative discontinuity in the story is the tendency to abruptly change the subject whenever the name of Gilda’s husband, Jack, comes up.

Yet by the middle of the story, it becomes apparent that hearing and memory loss are tropes for—or psychosomatic effects related to—the narrator’s repressed experience of having been molested by Jack. While Gilda-the-retiree insists during the narrator’s visits

that “we really were like family,” the narrator recalls feeling unsafe in her house as a child. She remembers trying but failing to tell on Jack because her own mother ridicules the complaint that Jack “breathes on me funny.” Unable to resist Gilda’s hospitality, the narrator endures Jack’s “funny” breathing, touching, grabbing, and tickling, for which there is always a good excuse. Instead, she decides, “I could handle Jack,” and always locks the door before going to bed at Gilda’s. What also stops her from exposing Jack is the unwillingness to humiliate Gilda and to give her mother another reason to look down on her besides dressing like a “tramp.”

“How do men know that you’ll be quiet?” the narrator asks herself. “And tell what, exactly?” What happened in Gilda’s home, whether or not Gilda and Jack’s interest in the child was genuine, vested, or prurient is left ambiguous. Several self-reflexive statements like “aren’t we all unreliable narrators of our own lives?” throw into question the reliability of the narrator’s memory. Nothing seems to have happened to her beyond the vague sense that Jack’s interest in her was improper. Her inability as an adult to cut off ties with the 89-year-old Gilda may be connected to her inability to resist Gilda’s hospitality as a child. “Maybe, maybe not,” for it is now the narrator who has the upper hand, as the younger, more mobile woman. Now she gets to tell on Gilda, Jack, and the deceased mother, who “had trouble remembering she had a daughter.”

HOSTS AWAY FROM HOME

The grown-up son of inattentive parents, who are more interested in each other than in him, is one of the four protagonists of *The Vulnerables*, a novel set during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second is an elderly woman writer. The third—a parrot. The fourth—the novel, an increasingly unwelcome genre in an age that values brevity and fact—the stuff of journalism (225–27). *The Vulnerables* can be read as an investigation into what sparks, sustains, and extinguishes the interest that motivates us to open our homes and our minds to others: flesh-and-blood humans, fictional humans, as well as non-human animals.

When the lockdown begins, all the characters, like players in a game of musical chairs, of which there are never enough, end up staying in other people’s homes, displaced, and at the mercy of someone’s hospitality. On the surface, then, hospitality to strangers has become the new norm during the lockdown.

Two-thirds of the novel’s action is set in a spacious Manhattan apartment where the parrot, Eureka, lives in a room of his own:

The walls had been painted [to look like] the South American rainforest that Eureka's breed inhabited in the wild [...] . Among the foliage were bright butterflies and exotic flowers and other wild birds, all exquisitely drawn and vibrantly colored [...]. It all reminded me of the jungle scenes of Henri Rousseau—and in fact the murals were the work of a professional artists who'd been commissioned to paint them. (94)

Painted jungle notwithstanding, Eureka is not at home, though he is well cared for. His owners, stranded on the West Coast when air traffic was cancelled, ask the writer-narrator to move into their apartment, to replace the young man who was the parrot's first sitter until he left New York to stay with his parents. An out-of-town female physician who is voluntarily treating COVID patients, moves into the writer's vacant apartment. Then the young man, thrown out by his parents, moves back in with the parrot, to the chagrin of the writer, who has made herself at home and resents the intrusion of the "flaky kid" (109). But the narrator believes that hospitality comes easy only to those who can afford it. For instance, she notes with surprise how many of her friends and acquaintances have second and third homes outside the city, to which they can withdraw. Later, she recalls reading a "viral tweet" that describes the lockdown as "the middle class hiding while working-class people bring them things." Another version: white people hiding while black and brown people bring them things" (98). Managing without deliveries and eating next to nothing, the writer imagines herself as beyond such divisions, yet she vigorously tries to protect her privacy by getting rid of the young man.

Since technically only Eureka is at home, and he is only the host in a symbolic sense, the two human characters negotiate guest-host relations. At first glance, Eureka mostly provides comic relief and animal interest to offset the dark human-interest stories, but in fact he plays a far more important role. The writer's interactions with Eureka, described in minute detail, bring out the exotic bird's vulnerability and dependence on human companionship for mental health (99–103). Likewise, the writer's mental health proves frail. Frightened by the pandemic and unable to write, she comes to rely heavily on the bird's antics and companionship.⁷ Hence her hostility when the young man starts to compete with her for Eureka's attention. Uninterested in who he is, she secretly calls him Vetch, the name of a weed (107). She keeps different

7 Nunez also looked closely at human-animal dependency in two earlier novels: Leonard and Virginia Woolf's relations with their pet monkey, in *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury* (1998), and a man and a dog sharing the experience of bereavement in *The Friend* (2018).

hours to avoid Vetch, and makes angry phone calls to the apartment's owners, who insists he stays. It is only when the narrator succumbs to a depression-like state and stops getting out of bed that the presence of Vetch, who ineptly tries to feed and draw her out, becomes bearable. She steals his ice cream, apologizes, and the two spend the second half of the novel talking, often while stoned on Vetch's psilocybin. No intellectual equal of the narrator, Vetch nonetheless makes up for his naivete by being genuinely interested in her as a writer. The young man's fantasies of hitch-hiking across the continent, sparked by Kerouac's *On the Road*, resonate with the elderly woman's memories of her countercultural youth. She catches herself falling in love. He moves out to his college dorm, taking the parrot with him. She grieves.

THE VULNERABLE NOVEL AND THE WRITER

Braided into this comic love plot are the narrator's reflections on the fourth character, the novel, which, in her view, is no longer welcome in the contemporary world.

Growing consensus: The traditional novel has lost its place as the major genre of our time. It may not be dead yet, but it will not long abide. No matter how well done, it seems to lack urgency. No matter how imaginative, it seems to lack originality [...]. More and more writers are having difficulty quieting a voice that says, *Why are you making things up?* (227)

The narrator concludes that "perhaps what is wanted in our own dark anti-truth times [...] is a literature of personal history and reflection: direct, authentic, scrupulous about fact" (227). As a fiction writer, she smarts from the hostility of judgmental readers, expressed in letters with authoritative injunctions about how not to write. She reflects on writer's block, on the crass marketing of fiction through book clubs, and on the fact that in the times of identity politics "the writer is becoming less like a creative artist and more like a politician: ever evasive, fixated on construal" (240).

It is not just the publishing marketplace and the readership that seem hostile to the narrator. To some extent, so were her early mentors, who "scoff[ed]" at her writing and "secretly want[ed her] to fail" (235). This brief mention of the mentors in *The Vulnerables* is elaborated on in an earlier work, *Sempre Susan* (2011), Nunez's memoir of Susan Sontag, where we encounter the two mentors who "scoff" at Nunez's writing: Elisabeth Hardwick (her Barnard writing professor) and Susan Sontag (her employer and host for two years). "Bad, every word of it, not worth writing" (111) were the words with which Elisabeth Hard-

wick dismissed “Chang.” “Once, in front of several people, [Sontag] told me, ‘Everyone is publishing their crap. Why shouldn’t you publish your crap too?’” (65).

Sempre Susan recounts how Sontag, who had just returned to her rented Manhattan apartment from the first round of cancer treatment in 1976, invited Nunez to live there as her assistant. For over two years, Nunez functioned both as a guest and a caregiver, responsible not so much for the secretarial tasks she was hired to do but for the emotional labor of helping Sontag recover as a writer and public intellectual. Soon after moving in, Nunez entered into a relationship with Sontag’s son, David, with Sontag’s approval. She was introduced to the New York literary scene, on the margins of which she would hover until *The Friend* would win the National Book Award. In the memoir, she repeatedly expresses gratitude for Sontag’s hospitality and mentoring, yet she shows how Sontag’s intrusive, overbearing, and emotionally draining persona stunted her as a young writer. “Don’t be so servile” (8). “Don’t be so conventional” (8). “‘Stop letting people bully you,’ she would bully me” (72). “Resist the pressure to think of yourself as a woman writer” (90). “Resist the temptation to think of yourself as a victim” (90). What Nunez managed to resist was the pressure to follow much of this advice, while learning from Sontag to take reading and writing seriously: “I am grateful to have had as an early model someone who held such an exalted, unironic view of the writer’s vocation” (84). Although she acknowledges that Hardwick’s and Sontag’s tough mentoring pushed her to excel, their comments must have shamed her deeply if she remembered them so clearly forty years later.

Looking back on her relation with Sontag, Nunez implies that at times she was treated somewhat like a household pet rather than a potential equal. “Seeing me curled up in her son’s lap, she fixed me with a cool I’ve-got-your-number look and lisped mockingly, ‘The little girl and her big man’” (48, emphasis in the original). And yet, in recognition of the fact that Nunez was an aspiring fiction writer, Sontag gave her “the maid’s room” to use as a study. Admittedly, it was a luxury Sontag did not need because she liked being surrounded by people who could serve as sounding boards for her ideas (95–96). “(‘You’re the only one in the house with *two* rooms,’ Susan would say, hurt, accusing, when I told her I was leaving ‘340.’)” (14). Nunez sums up her life at “340” as both stimulating and “a time of great discomfort and confusion and constraint [. . .]. Though I had little privacy or solitude, I felt isolated in a way I never had before” (106), not unlike the parrot Eureka, in a room of his own, painted to look like the rainforest.

CONCLUSION

There is nothing inherent in the fragmentary narrative, whether braid, collage, or bricolage, that makes it egalitarian or democratic. Although some of the writers who developed this form of writing “had distinctly leftist views,” others, like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, are notorious for their fascist and anti-Semitic sympathies, respectively (Drag, *Collage* 25). Embraced as a “transgressive force” by feminists and queers, among others, fragmentary writing may equally well convey “the most reactionary and conservative desires” (David Banash, qtd. in *Collage* 25). I have attempted to show that, as used by Nunez, this narrative technique is egalitarian and that it allows for the juxtaposition of various shades of in/hospitality. In fact, Nunez’s prose does the kind of work Lance Olsen described as “effacing, or at least deeply and richly complicating, the accepted difference between privileged and subordinate discourses” (Olsen, qtd. in *Collage* 20).

In the narratives discussed above, the perspectives of hosts and guests, the old and the young, human and non-human animals collide. In some cases, it is unclear who is hosting or taking care of whom. For example, Eureka lives a princely life in his painted room, with human helpers at his beck and call, yet he would die if left alone. His amusing antics keep the narrator from sliding into a depression, so he is, in a sense, a caregiver. Conceivably, though, he performs amusing tricks to interest humans in himself and to keep them from leaving.

Nunez is particularly sensitive to the precarious position of animals, children, the elderly, the displaced, and all those who depend on the interest and hospitality of others, but her writing repeatedly shows that “guest” and “host” are positions rather than fixed identities. Characters who have themselves been displaced—such as the German mother in “Chang” or the narrator of *The Vulnerables*—annex new spaces and attempt to oust those they perceive as rivals. In *Sempre Susan*, Sontag’s attitude towards her house guest, Nunez, is shown as alternately caring and hostile, generous and exploitative, liberating and stifling. Perhaps it was Sontag’s advice: “Resist the temptation to think of yourself as a victim” (*Sempre Susan* 90) that encouraged Nunez to unflinchingly examine in “Chang” the way a daughter’s disaffection and loss of interest in her father contributes to his self-exile from home. On the formal level, the theme of hospitality is underscored by the narrator’s openness to interrupting herself and being interrupted. In sum, the technique of fragmentation developed by Nunez lends itself well to laying bare the contradictions associated with the practices of hospitality and their affective underpinnings.

Abstract: This paper proposes the notion of “narrative hospitality” for interpreting a particular kind of discontinuous or fragmentary writing, and discusses this technique with reference to the work of contemporary American author Sigrid Nunez. Arguably, hospitality as a mode of storytelling and as a problem can be found throughout Nunez’s oeuvre. The paper opens with a section on the aesthetics of fragmentation, based on recent theoretical approaches by Vanessa Guignery, Wojciech Drąg, Meritt Moseley, and others. It then goes on to interpret Nunez’s prose as hospitable on the formal level and links her use of fragmentation with the theme of hospitality in “Chang,” “It Will Come Back to You” (2001), *Sempre Susan* (2011), and *The Vulnerables* (2023). Although there is nothing inherent in the fragmentary narrative that makes it egalitarian or democratic, it has been embraced as a transgressive form by feminists and queers, among others. Nunez’s use of this narrative technique is egalitarian in that it allows for the juxtaposition of various manifestations of in/hospitality. In fact, Nunez’s prose does the kind of work Lance Olsen described as “effacing, or at least deeply and richly complicating, the accepted difference between privileged and subordinate discourses” (Olsen, qtd. in Drąg, *Collage* 20). Nunez is particularly sensitive to the precarious position of animals, children, the elderly, the displaced, and all those who depend on the interest and hospitality of others, but her writing repeatedly shows that “guest” and “host” are positions rather than fixed identities. On the formal level, the theme of hospitality is underscored by the narrator’s openness to interrupting herself and being interrupted. In sum, Nunez’s technique of fragmentation lends itself to laying bare the contradictions associated with the practices of hospitality and their affective underpinnings.

Keywords: Sigrid Nunez, narrative hospitality, fragmentation, interest, inhospitality, guest

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