



Review

of International American Studies

MEANDERS OF HOSPITALITY in American Cultural Practice

**guest-edited by Jacek Partyka
and Marcelina Wieczorek**

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ED/NOTES

Paweł Jędrzejko

- 5 **THE PROFESSOR IS YOUR FRIEND**
On Hospitality, Knowledge, and Refusal of Enmity
in Academia

INTRO

Jacek Partyka and Marcelina Wieczorek

- 57 **HOSPITALITY,
OR WHY WE STILL NEED UTOPIAS**
An Introduction

FEATURES

John T. Matteson

- 73 **"FEROCIOUS ROOTS"**
Hospitality, Identity, and Exclusion
in Recent American Latina Literature

Magdalena Dziurzyńska

- 91 **WHEN DID HOSPITALITY GET SO HOSTILE?**
The US Latinx Diaspora as an American Dystopia
in Sabrina Vourvoulias' *Ink*

Katarzyna Macedulska

- 109 **APORIAS OF BELONGING
IN SANDRA UWIRINGIYIMANA'S
HOW DARE THE SUN RISE.
MEMOIRS OF A WAR CHILD (2017)**

Polina Golovátina-Mora and Anna Maria Karczewska

- 127 **HOSPITALITY IN THE REINTEGRATION PROCESS
OF EX-FARC COMBATANTS
IN THE GRAPHIC NOVEL *EN EL OMBLIGO***
by Gala Rocabert Navarro and Anna-Lina Mattar

Magdalena Łapińska

155 **WHEN HOSPITALITY BECOMES DEADLY**

Host-Guest Relations

in T. Kingfisher's *What Moves the Dead*

Dominika Ferens

171 **NARRATIVE HOSPITALITY**

Sigrid Nunez's Poetics of Fragmentation

Marcelina Wieczorek

191 **(UN)WELCOME IN PRISON**

African American Sonneteering

and the Limits of American (Literary) Hospitality

Rachmat Nurcahyo

205 **GHOST DANCE RETOLD**

From Sacred Resistance to Political Spectacle

Ernesto Domínguez López and Susana Hernández Plá

227 **THE CONCEPT OF PROGRESS**

IN PRESIDENTIAL POLITICAL DISCOURSE

IN THE UNITED STATES (1929–1935)

Justyna Fruzińska

245 **THE PRAGMATIST VISION**

OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"

Ritvik Singh Sabharwal

259 **THE ART OF POWER—MY STORY**

AS AMERICA'S FIRST WOMAN SPEAKER

OF THE HOUSE

by Nancy Pelosi

(A Book Review)

267 **RIAS STYLESHEET AND INFORMATION FOR THE AUTHORS**



THE PROFESSOR /S YOUR FRIEND

On Hospitality, Knowledge, and the Refusal of Enmity in Academia

Hospitality—understood not simply as sentiment or moral goodwill, but as an ethical, epistemic, and institutional practice—has long structured the university as a space in which strangers are received, disagreements worked through, and knowledge produced through sustained exposure to difference. The university, in this sense, is neither a sanctuary of consensus nor a factory of certainties. It is a site of risk: a place where ideas are tested in public, where authority remains provisional, and where intellectual life depends on the willingness to host what one does not yet understand. It is against this background that J.D. Vance’s keynote address at the Second National Conservatism Conference in November 2021—widely circulated under the title “The Universities Are the Enemy”—demands careful attention. In that speech, universities are recast as hostile institutions and intellectuals as adversaries of democratic life: producers of deception rather than knowledge, enforcers of ideology rather than interlocutors in public reason. Vance’s rhetoric, if approached systematically, manifests a rather clear dependency on systematic category errors: in his speech, he collapses institutional plurality into a singular agent; treats epistemic uncertainty as moral fraud; converts critique into hostility, and, last but not least, mistakes the *limits of expertise* for the *illegitimacy of expertise*. The VP’s chain of implication moves from *isolated controversies* to *systemic deceit* to *universities as enemies* to *permission* to “attack [them] *aggressively*.” The grammar of hospitality is thus reversed: the university appears not as a contested but necessary house of welcome, but as a space of exclusion whose very existence is framed as a threat. Conversely, I claim that controversies remain discussable only if we refuse the “enemy frame” adopted by J.D. Vance, and demonstrate

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that the university is precisely the infrastructure that keeps dispute from hardening into war. To attain this, the structure of this essay deliberately follows the pressure points of populist rhetoric leveled at the American academia—authority, crisis, children, debt, care, environment, race, expertise, and speech. I follow Vance’s order so as not to rehearse them polemically, but to expose their internal (faulty) logic by restoring the distinctions on which they fundamentally depend, even as those distinctions are systematically effaced in political practice.

Importantly, I respond to that rhetorical transformation without defending higher education as an idealized or flawless system. Universities and colleges vary widely in quality, mission, and practice; they operate under intense economic, political, and technological pressures; and in certain areas, some undeniably fall short of their stated goals. They sometimes fail to listen well enough, to consistently protect intellectual plurality, or to translate expertise into social trust. Yet acknowledging such failures does not exhaust the meaning of *critique*. The latter is an indispensable part of academic life, precisely because the university is not a closed or self-legitimizing system, but a *porous* one—exposed to disagreement, vulnerability, and historical change. What is at stake, therefore, is not whether institutions err, but whether they remain capable of sustaining a position from which someone can still speak in the first person—and be answered. Properly understood, the university is not merely a site where encounters happen incidentally; it is a space in which a student, a scholar, or an interested citizen may still say *I* without prior authorization, and in which that *I* comes into being only insofar as it is addressed to a *You*:

The You encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking. But that I speak the basic word to it is a deed of my whole being, is my essential deed.

The You encounters me. But I enter into a direct relationship to it. Thus the relationship is election and electing, passive and active at once: an action of the whole being must approach passivity, for it does away with all partial actions and thus with any sense of action, which always depends on limited exertions.

The basic word *I–You* can be spoken only with one’s whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You.

All actual life is encounter.

The relation to the You is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness. No purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation; and longing itself is changed as it plunges from the dream into appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur.

The present—not that which is like a point and merely designates whatever our thoughts may posit as the end of “elapsed” time, but the actual and fulfilled present—exists only insofar as presentness, encounter, and relation exist. Only as the You becomes present does presence come into being. (Buber 62–63)

It is for this reason that the personification of the university as an “enemy” is *fundamentally* in error. The university is *not a sovereign agent*, nor a monolithic will. It is not a set of buildings and bureaucratic systems, not an algorithm of income, evaluation, and expenditure. The university is, irreducibly, a *relation* among people: students, teachers, researchers, readers, interlocutors. To construe it otherwise is to perform a categorical reduction—to force what is constituted through encounter into the logic of objecthood. When this reduction occurs, the relation central to the very essence of the university is displaced from *I–You* to *I–It*, and the living present of intellectual exchange is replaced by a dead inventory of functions, metrics, and abstractions:

The I of the basic word *I–It*, the I that is not bodily confronted by a You but surrounded by a multitude of “contents,” has only a past and no present. In other words: insofar as a human being makes do with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his moment has no presence. He has nothing but objects; but objects consist in having been. (Buber 62–64)

What follows, therefore, is an insight that resists the conversion of institutional critique into a politics of siege. Of course, institutions do have administrative power, incentives, reputational economies, and sometimes coercive bureaucracies; the point is not that power is absent, but that Vance’s rhetoric treats the *existence of power* as proof of a unified hostile will. This is why, rather than asking whether universities deserve loyalty or condemnation, in this essay I propose a different ethical framework: hospitality understood as an institutional, epistemic, and civic practice grounded in relation rather than control. Read through the lens of Martin Buber’s account of encounter, the university, appears as a fragile space in which *presence* must repeatedly be attained. If it is not, wherever academic life is reduced to metrics, credentials, or ideological sorting, wherever the university is construed as *machinery* of influence or domination, the *I–You* relation collapses into *I–It*: knowledge becomes an *object* to be wielded, and authority turns into a *means* rather than emerges as a *response*.

Therefore, claiming that “the professor is your friend” I do not aim to sentimentalize academic life or deny its conflicts. I insist that intellectual authority, like ethical life itself, emerges only where relation is sustained *without guarantees*. Democratic knowledge is not produced

by unanimity or submission. It may only emerge where disagreement is *hosted* rather than *expelled*, where authority remains *answerable* rather than *sovereign*, and where the Other—student, colleague, citizen—is approached *not as a threat* to be neutralized but *as a presence* to which one *is willing to, and must, respond*. The democratic question is thus not whether experts influence policy—of course they do—but whether their influence remains *contestable, transparent, and institutionally non-sovereign*.

The argument that follows therefore proceeds in two movements. The first establishes a philosophical grammar of authority, uncertainty, and hospitality by returning to thinkers—Kant, Arendt, Lévinas, Buber, Derrida—who refused to equate authority with certainty or coercion. This theoretical groundwork is not ancillary: it reconstructs distinctions that contemporary public rhetoric systematically collapses.

The second movement then returns, section by section, to the recurring accusations leveled against universities in contemporary political discourse, treating them not as isolated instances of (intentional) misrepresentation, but as symptoms of a single, profound, conceptual error. Read together, these movements form a mirror to the anti-intellectual logic they contest: where political lingo invokes *authority as domination*, this essay insists on *authority as relation*, and where certainty is ideologically demanded, it defends judgment under conditions of risk.

HOSPITALITY AND THE FANTASY OF EPISTEMIC CONTROL

Hospitality begins precisely where mastery falters. Any discourse that promises full control over truth—over what may count as knowledge, over who may speak it, and under what conditions—already betrays a fear of encounter. Such promises presuppose an isolated subject who stands outside relation, adjudicating meaning without being addressed in return. In recent public rhetoric, institutions of learning have increasingly been described as hostile powers that “control” reality itself: arbiters of truth and falsity, manufacturers of belief, enemies disguised as educators. These descriptions are rhetorically efficient, but philosophically incoherent. They confuse inquiry with command, exposure with domination, and responsibility with rule. What such claims also obscure is a more basic distinction—one between *hostility* and *right(s)*—that has long structured philosophical accounts of hospitality.

Hospitality, as Immanuel Kant insists in the Third Definitive Article of *Perpetual Peace*, is not a matter of *benevolence* or *moral sentiment*, but of *right*:

[...] *hospitality* (a host's conduct to his guest) means the right of a stranger not to be treated in a hostile manner by another upon his arrival on the other's territory. If it can be done without causing his death, the stranger can be turned away, yet as long as the stranger behaves peacefully where he happens to be, his host may not treat him with hostility. It is not the *right of a guest* that the stranger has a claim to (which would require a special, charitable contract stipulating that he be made a member of the household for a certain period of time), but rather a right to visit, to which all human beings have a claim, to present oneself to society by virtue of the right of common possession of the surface of the earth. Since it is the surface of a sphere, they cannot scatter themselves on it without limit, but they must rather ultimately tolerate one another as neighbors, and originally no one has more of a right to be at a given place on earth than anyone else. (Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace* 82)

Interpreted in Kant's perspective, the language of enmity leveled at the university reveals a categorical error. To name an institution of inquiry—honoring the Other's "right to visit," extending "household membership" universally—as *hostile* is not merely to criticize its failures: it is to deny the very *condition* under which appearance, address, and contestation become possible at all. Such rhetoric does not simply mis-describe the university; it distorts disagreement into domination and twists critique into suspicion. What is lost in this transformation is the distinction between *authority* and *coercion*—a distinction that Hannah Arendt identified as decisive for understanding modern political crises. Ideological thinking, she argues, does not emerge from curiosity or inquiry, but from the *desire to subsume reality* under a single explanatory logic:

An ideology is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the "logic of an idea." Its subject matter is history, to which the "idea" is applied; the result of this application is not a body of statements about something that is, but the unfolding of a process which is in constant change. Ideologies pretend to know the mysteries of the whole historical process—the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future—because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas.

Ideologies are never interested in the miracle of being. They are concerned with becoming and perishing, with the rise and fall of cultures, even when they explain history by some "law of nature." (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 469)

The question, then, is not whether universities exercise influence—no institution of knowledge operates without it—but whether inquiry remains open to interruption by what exceeds its frameworks. Arendt's warning concerns the closure of thinking under a single explanatory logic, not the plural, self-corrective practices that define academic inquiry as such. In the scholar view, the danger of ideological educa-

tion lies precisely in its hostility to such interruption. As she notes with stark precision: “The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any” (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 468).

The fantasy of epistemic control thus reveals itself not as a defense of truth, but as a symptom of ideological anxiety. Where thinking is reduced to repetition and certainty is enforced in advance, *authority collapses into coercion*. Arendt’s distinction between *power* and *violence* makes this collapse unmistakable:

Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance. Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it. (Arendt, *On Violence* 56)

Authority, in Arendt’s understanding, depends neither on persuasion nor on force, but on recognition and respect. The erosion of authority does not *justify coercion*; on the contrary: it exposes the fragility of the relationship that once sustained it. Recoding institutions of inquiry as enemies, then, is not a gesture aimed at *restoring authority*; in fact, it is tantamount to *abandoning* it.

Thus, Arendt’s analysis ultimately reveals that the crisis of authority is inseparable from the crisis of relation. Authority does not collapse because disagreement exists, but because the conditions under which disagreement can appear as meaningful relation land “under erasure.” Once institutions are imagined as *sovereign powers* rather than *relational spaces*, exposure itself begins to look like threat. At this point, the political language of hostility no longer serves to formulate a response to concrete failures, and no longer can it be construed as motivated by *honest concern*; instead, it becomes a medium of *denying the fact that the world is shared* (Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace* 82), of questioning the existence of the world in which authority, recognition, and responsibility might still arise within the dynamics of the encounter. Such *abandonment of authority* thus coincides with an attempt to seal borders—conceptual as well as political—against interruption, arrival, and, ultimately, address.

From the perspective of hemispheric and transoceanic American studies, this displacement of authority by hostility becomes especially revealing. The United States has never been intelligible as a self-contained epistemic space *precisely* because its knowledge formations have always been exposed to movement: to people, texts, theories, and conflicts circulating across the Atlantic, the Pacific, and the Americas them-

selves. American universities (including Harvard Divinity School or West Point) did not emerge as guardians of a *singular national truth*, but as sites where heterogeneous traditions encountered one another under conditions of uneven power, historical asymmetry, and mutual vulnerability. To project the contemporary university as *an enemy within* is therefore to erase a longer history, in which “American” knowledge systems have been constituted—not by *insulation*, but by *sustained exposure* to what arrives from elsewhere.

Universities exist, at their best, to institutionalize this exposure without neutralizing it. They are not engines of consensus nor factories of loyalty, but fragile architectures of encounter: spaces in which claims are advanced provisionally, contested publicly, and revised in the presence of others, whose perspectives cannot be fully anticipated, much less controlled. Accusing such institutions of “controlling truth” reveals a misunderstanding of their function at the most basic level. Control seeks *closure*; inquiry depends on *exposure*. Where Vance argues that legitimacy comes from diplomas rather than democracy, and frames this as quasi-usurpation, Tadeusz Sławek reminds us, following Henry David Thoreau, that friendship does not begin in proclamation, but in listening—listening to the “friend across the pond,” whose voice reaches us distorted, delayed, and demands patience.¹ When the university remains faithful to this ethos, it is not an enemy of the public. It is one of the few remaining spaces in which society practices the difficult art of remaining exposed to difference before deciding whom it is safe to hear.

FROM HOSTILITY TO HOST: UNIVERSITIES AND THE ETHICS OF WELCOME

Let me then reiterate the point I have made at the onset of this essay: any attempt to describe the university as a hostile institution is an attempt to present it in a false mirror, inverting, almost perfectly, its ethical grammar. Whatever their failures, universities are not structured as *fortresses* but as *hosts*: places designed—sometimes awkwardly, sometimes inadequately—to receive what comes from elsewhere. Students arrive displaying uneven levels of preparation, shaped by divergent histories, and often harboring incompatible expectations. Ideas arrive already marked by prior use, translation,

1 I recall this formulation from a lecture delivered by Professor Tadeusz Sławek to students of the University of Silesia in Katowice. To the best of my knowledge, the remark has not appeared in print *verbatim*. I cite it here as an instance of oral academic transmission that has informed my own understanding of hospitality, listening, and friendship within the university.

and conflict. Scholars arrive from different national, cultural, and linguistic communities, carrying with them intellectual debts that cannot be easily repaid. Hospitality, under such conditions, is not an ideal state, but a continuous practice of *negotiation*.

Therefore it seems comprehensible that the rising popularity of the managerial idiom “now we get down to business” may be unavoidable in a variety of contexts of our daily lives. The danger arises when this idiom is allowed to redefine the ethical horizon of the university itself. On this point, Tadeusz Ślawek, former Rector of the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland, is unsentimental and precise:

This *now we get down to business*—undoubtedly necessary in the contemporary world of difficult economic conditions—should never become the battle cry of the university. Were it to dominate the university’s activity, the institution would turn into something akin to a notary’s office, where, in exchange for an appropriate fee, the apprentice obtains guarantees of the fulfillment of their ambitions.

If we are to use the word *business* at all, we should remember and emphasize the element of risk and uncertainty that is always inherent in it. To speak of the university’s “business,” then, is not to speak of guarantees of success achieved by subjecting reality to the pressure of individual ambition, but rather of a readiness to assume responsibility for what is contingent and risky.

The university teaches, among other things, that I cannot deal with the world according to my will and ambitions. It is *mystery*, not *secret*, that constitutes the proper element of an education conducive to the human future. Not what I have and know, not what I plan and strive for—important though these matters are—but rather what I do not have and do not know, what lies beyond the strict outlines of my ambitions, will, to a significant degree, shape my future, which itself already belongs to the realm of *mystery* rather than *secret*. (Ślawek, *Antygonia* 37–38)²

This insistence on *mystery* rather than *mastery* already situates the university within an ethical horizon in which *openness* is not a *weakness*, but a *condition of responsibility*. Such an understanding of education—as exposure to contingency rather than the manufacture of certainty—has been central to the American university, largely because American culture itself has been formed through *movement* rather than *stasis*.

What then is the American, this new man? [...] He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our

2 All quoted texts originally written in Polish have been translated by the author.

great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle. The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared, and which will hereafter become distinct by the power of the different climates they inhabit. [...] The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence.—This is an American. (St. John de Crèvecoeur)

Crèvecoeur's figure of the "new man" casts Americanness, already in the late eighteenth century, as the *product of movement*—of departure, circulation, and reception into the "broad lap" of an imagined Alma Mater—anticipating a conception of formation in which identity is shaped through exposure to contingency rather than the manufacture of certainty, a logic that would become central both to American self-understanding and to the ethical imagination of the American university. Yet this expansive metaphor of mobility ultimately rests on a surprisingly static horizon of belonging. For all his rhetoric of mixture and incorporation, Crèvecoeur's "new man" remains implicitly white: his account quietly presupposes the erasure of Indigenous peoples and the enslaved, and it is exactly this constitutive exclusion—this selective hospitality—that a hemispheric and transoceanic frame must bring back into view as we turn to the university's own ethics of welcome. Hemispheric and transoceanic approaches remind us that "American" knowledge has never emerged in isolation but has been shaped by Indigenous epistemologies suppressed by Atlantic modernity and its violences, by transpacific migrations, by Cold War circulations of theory, and by contemporary global entanglements that refuse neat cartography. Therefore, the importance of teaching history does not lie in *assigning guilt*; it is about *training perception*, it is about what a democracy is *willing to notice*. Thus, the university does not function as a host by *harmonizing* varied trajectories, but by allowing them to *coexist in tension*; whenever hostility emerges, it does not emerge from this dynamics; conversely: it is a result of the attempts to deny it.

If such coexistence is to be sustained rather than merely proclaimed, it must be underwritten by an ethical capacity for judgment in the face of imposed certainties, cultivated within individuals. If the university has a civic vocation, it is not to enforce unanimity. Tadeusz Sławek frames this mission by invoking Antigone—not as much as a figure

of heroic refusal, as one of critical fidelity: a figure of insistence that power and authority remain answerable to judgment.

The university should follow Antigone's way of thinking, because its task is to educate in such a manner that a person—both within the walls of the university and beyond them, in professional life and in the private sphere—retains a potential for critical reflection, and is capable of evaluating the actions of power and authority.

The university safeguards, at the very least, the necessary minimum of that space within us, in which we do not identify with the given state of affairs and do not capitulate before it by accepting, under the pretense of objectivity, whatever conditions are imposed. Nothing obscures the image of the university more thoroughly than an uncritical surrender to an idea which—in my understanding—ought to become an idea shared by everyone. (Sławek, *Antygona* 126)

Major philosophical approaches to hospitality help clarify why such denial may be tempting. Hospitality always carries the shadow of the desire to control “who enters” and “on what terms.” The host seeks guarantees, or at least assurances, that the guest will not disrupt the household, challenge its norms, or demand its reconfiguration. When these guarantees are not forthcoming, welcome may curdle into suspicion. In contemporary political rhetoric, the university becomes the scapegoat for this anxiety. It is not accused of *failing to welcome*: it is charged with *welcoming too much*—admitting voices, histories, and questions that transgress the thresholds of the comfort zone of inherited narratives.

Admittedly, hospitality is *not a simple virtue*. Jacques Derrida's point is that the very practices that make hospitality possible—name, status, family, legal legibility—also limit it. One welcomes the Other, as it were, only by placing them under a regime of recognition; and yet the demand for recognition can itself become a refusal of welcome:

[...] this right to hospitality offered to a foreigner “as a family,” represented and protected by his or her family name, is at once what makes hospitality possible, or the hospitable relationship to the foreigner possible, but by the same token what limits and prohibits it. Because hospitality, in this situation, is not offered to an anonymous new arrival and someone who has neither name, nor patronym, nor family, nor social status, and who is therefore treated not as a foreigner but as another barbarian [...]. [T]he absolute or unconditional hospitality I would like to offer him or her presupposes a break with hospitality in the ordinary sense, with conditional hospitality, with the right to or pact of hospitality. In saying this, once more, we are taking account of an irreducible pervertibility. The law of hospitality, the express law that governs the general concept of hospitality, appears as a paradoxical law, pervertible or perverting. It seems to dictate that absolute hospitality should break with the law of hospitality as right or duty, with the “pact” of hospitality. To put it in different terms, absolute hospitality requires that

I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner ... but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other [...] without asking of them either reciprocity ... or even their names. (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 23–25)

Hospitality worthy of the name, then, cannot be reduced to affirmation. *To host* is neither *to agree in advance*, nor *to shield oneself from discomfort*. It is to accept the ethical burden of encounter: the obligation to listen, to respond, and sometimes to refuse—but it means to do so without erasing the other's presence. The very first movement of hospitality, Derrida suggests, can take the form *interrogation* rather than *welcome*—an apparently humane gesture that nonetheless installs the other within the grammar of law:

Now the foreigner, the *xenos* of whom Socrates says, “him at least you would respect, you would tolerate his accent and his idiom,” or the one of whom Benveniste says that he enters into a pact, this foreigner who has the right to hospitality in the cosmopolitan tradition which will find its most powerful form in Kant and the text we have read and reread (*Perpetual Peace*), this foreigner, then, is someone with whom, to receive him, you begin by asking his name; you enjoin him to state and to guarantee his identity, as you would a witness before a court.

This is someone to whom you put a question and address a demand, the first demand, the minimal demand being: “What is your name?” Or then: “In telling me what your name is, in responding to this request, you are responding on your own behalf, you are responsible before the law and before your hosts, you are a subject in law.”

That, following one of the directions it takes, is the question of the foreigner as the question of the question. Does hospitality consist in interrogating the new arrival? Does it begin with the question addressed to the newcomer (which seems very human and sometimes loving, assuming that hospitality should be linked to love—an enigma that we will leave in reserve for the moment): what is your name? Tell me your name, what should I call you, I who am calling on you, I who want to call you by your name? What am I going to call you? It is also what we sometimes tenderly ask children and those we love.

Or else does hospitality begin with the unquestioning welcome, in a double effacement: the effacement of the question and the name? Is it more just and more loving to question or not to question? To call by the name or without the name? To give or to learn a name already given? Does one give hospitality to a subject? To an identifiable subject? To a subject identifiable by name? To a legal subject? Or is hospitality rendered, is it given to the other before they are identified, even before they are (posited as or supposed to be) a subject—legal subject and subject nameable by their family name, etc.?

The question of hospitality is thus also the question of the question; but by the same token the question of the subject and the name as hypothesis of descent. (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 27–29)

Analyzed in this perspective, the figure of the *xenos* can no longer be confined to the semantic field of the word “foreigner” taken

in a narrow, or juridical, sense. In contemporary American political discourse, the logic Derrida describes has expanded to the point where xenicity itself becomes detachable from its origin: *dissenting citizens, critical scholars, racialized minorities, and even liberal, American-born Americans may be rendered strangers within their own polity*. The question “What is your name?”—what do you stand for, where do you belong, whose side are you on—no longer functions as a threshold of welcome. Conversely, it propels the mechanism of expulsion, transforming hospitality into a test of loyalty rather than asserting it as an act of openness to encounter.

Universities, when they function as hosts, tackle this burden institutionally. As has already been stressed, they preserve spaces in which disagreement does not collapse into expulsion, and where conflict can be articulated without being resolved by force. But they do so under conditions that are never innocent: hospitality requires a threshold, and the threshold introduces power, mastery, and self-limitation. The political fantasy that the university can be either purely “open” or purely “secure” mistakes the structure of hospitality for a policy preference. Derrida observes:

[T]he host, the one who offers hospitality, must be master at his house, he (in the masculine, first of all) must be assured of sovereignty over the space and the goods that he offers or opens to the other as stranger or foreigner. This seems to be both the law of laws of hospitality and what appears to us as common sense in our culture. It does not seem that I am able to open or offer hospitality, no matter how generous, and even for it to be generous, without also implying: this belongs to me, I am at home, be welcome at my house, without implying, then: “make yourself at home” but on condition that you observe the rules of hospitality, that is to say, respect the being at home of my home, the being oneself of what I am. [...] There, within the law of hospitality, an axiom of self-limitation or self-contradiction can be found whose consequences and corollaries we have not finished exploring. As reaffirmation of mastery and of being oneself at home, hospitality limits itself already from the threshold on its own threshold (*dès le seuil sur le seuil d'elle-même*), it remains always on the threshold of itself, it commands the threshold—and to that very extent it forbids in a certain way crossing the threshold whose crossing it seems to permit. Hospitality becomes the threshold. That is why we do not know what it is, and cannot know. The minute we know it, we no longer know it, what it is properly, what is its identity threshold. (Derrida, *Hospitality*, 46–47)

Hospitality, as Derrida shows, is ethically indispensable yet, bordering on the threshold of identity, structurally unstable. It can never be fully pure, because to welcome another one must (always)-already occupy a place, exercise responsibility for it, and set conditions for encounter. Hospitality therefore does not unfold as unlimited

openness, but as a *practice* reified at the threshold between welcome and restraint, exposure and care.

This paradox illuminates the figure of the “professor as friend.” The professor does not relinquish authority, expertise, or responsibility—nor does she wield them as instruments of sovereignty. Instead, authority is exercised specifically through the maintenance of conditions under which thinking can occur without coercion—conditions that invite students into a shared space of inquiry while refusing both *domination* and *abdication*. Friendship, in this sense, does not resolve the tension between authority and openness; it inhabits it ethically, acknowledging that education, like hospitality itself, is always practiced under conditions of risk, responsibility, and imperfect welcome.

[...] in saying [...] that hospitality in a certain way always does the contrary of what it claims to do and comes to a standstill on its very threshold, the threshold that it re- marks and constitutes, on itself in short, on both its phenomenon and its essence, I am not claiming to say that hospitality is this double bind or this aporetic contradiction, and thus that where it is, there is none. No, I am saying that this apparent aporetic paralysis on the threshold “is” (I place quotation marks around “is” or I cross it out, if you prefer) what must be crossed, this “is” “is” in order that, beyond hospitality, hospitality may come about. Hospitality can take place only beyond hospitality, only by deciding, while letting come, to cross over that hospitality that lets itself get paralyzed on the threshold that it is. It is necessary to let come beyond hospitality, if that is possible. It is in that sense perhaps that “we do not know (not yet, but always not yet)” what hospitality is, and that it awaits its chance and stretches toward its chance beyond what it is, namely, the paralysis on the threshold that it is. In this sense, it is always to come, but from a to-come that does not present itself and will never present itself as such, as present. To think hospitality on the basis of the future, on the basis of this future that will not present itself, or will present itself only where it will not be awaited as present or presentable, is to think it on the basis of death no less than of birth. (Derrida, *Hospitality*, 47)

Derrida’s account of hospitality thus explains why the figure of the professor-as-friend is necessarily uneasy, albeit ethically indispensable. Hospitality, he insists, can never be secured as a stable condition: the host must assert responsibility, authority, and limits, yet these very conditions threaten to neutralize welcome by turning it into control. Hospitality occurs only when this tension is *embraced* rather than *resolved*—when one decides to remain open without the guarantee that openness will remain safe, reciprocal, or affirmed. The professor who teaches *as-a-friend* inhabits precisely this threshold: she speaks from a position of responsibility and expertise, yet risks that authority by addressing students as interlocutors rather than subordinates. Such friendship does not abolish hierarchy, but exposes it to relation. It calls

into existence an authority willing to remain answerable—to teach without mastery over outcomes, and to welcome thought that may not return as agreement. The fact that *Thou* becomes *You*, however, is not tantamount to the claim of sovereignty: in fact, it propels dialogue, or—in the case of the university, a polylogue, or a polyphony of voices-in-an-encounter.

Thus, to recode academic practice as hostility is to mistake exposure for aggression and plurality for threat. Such rhetorical gestures ultimately reject the very fundamentals upon which shared intellectual life—national or transnational—can endure. What such a formulation refuses to acknowledge is the *aporetic structure* of hospitality itself. The difficulty of academic friendship does not arise from the fact that hospitality *hesitates* or pauses at the threshold, but because it *cannot be stabilized into a transparent rule* without betraying its own ethical claim. Yet, the tension between openness and limitation is not a *defect to be corrected*; it is the very condition under which hospitality can become reified at all.

At this point, hospitality-by-right reveals its paradoxical capacity to generate the very hostility it seeks to prevent. Conditional welcome, once absolutized, becomes indistinguishable from exclusion; “protection” slides into “suspicion,” and “order” into the “production of the enemy.”

It is therefore no accident that, at the moment when hospitality threatens to transmogrify into its opposite, Derrida turns explicitly to Lévinas. His gesture is not but a rhetorical flourish: it points to a decisive ethical reorientation. When the grammar of “law” and “contract” proves insufficient, Derrida invokes a figure that cannot be accommodated within the logic of mastery or reciprocity—the figure of the *hostage*, exposed to the other *prior to sovereignty*, prior to assurance, prior even to the promise of return:

It is then the opposite of pure hospitality, precisely because this hospitality by right is too hospitable to its opposite. The perhaps impossible hospitality against which I am here measuring this hospitality of rights is an infinite hospitality, one which, faced with the singularity of each other who is received, renounces every prerogative, indeed every inviolability of ipseity, every power, if you prefer; it is an infinite hospitality in which the host who receives would in that way become the invitee delivered over to the invitee, the guest of the guest, if not their hostage—or anyway their hostage in a Lévinasian sense. (Derrida, *Hospitality* 88)

In this perspective, the university’s vulnerability—its openness to voices that unsettle inherited narratives, its refusal to guarantee comfort or consensus—seems to emerge as the condition of the pos-

sibility of productive dynamics and not as a deviation from its mission. What anti-intellectual rhetoric often denounces as *hostility* is often nothing more than the visible trace of an institution *willing to remain exposed* to positions or phenomena it cannot (or could ever) fully anticipate or domesticate. Gestures leading to the rejection of that exposure do not lead to the restoration of order; conversely—they *foreclose* the very encounters through which knowledge, responsibility, and shared intellectual life come into being.

KNOWLEDGE AS ENCOUNTER, NOT INDOCTRINATION

The charge that universities exist to indoctrinate rather than to educate rests on a deeply impoverished understanding of how knowledge functions. Indoctrination presupposes a closed circuit: a fixed doctrine transmitted unidirectionally from an alleged authority to a subject expected to *receive* rather than *respond*, insulated from challenge, contestation, and revision. Knowledge, by contrast, emerges through encounter. It takes shape in the friction between claims, in the exposure of assumptions to critique, and in the slow labor of translation across difference. To confuse these two processes is not merely an error of description; it is a refusal to recognize the ethical structure of learning itself.

Accounts of education grounded in responsibility have long insisted that knowledge cannot be severed from relation. From Epicurus's understanding of philosophy as a practice of life, through Florian Znaniecki's relational sociology of knowledge, to Alfred North Whitehead's processual account of learning, education repeatedly appears as the opposite to the *imposition of certainty*: it is construed as an *event that unfolds between persons*. For Emmanuel Lévinas, this relationality acquires its most radical ethical form: the encounter with the Other interrupts the sovereignty of the self, calling it into question *before any doctrine can be secured*. Learning, on this account, is not the accumulation of correct positions but the willingness to be addressed by what one does not yet understand. As Lévinas insists, the ethical relation that makes such learning possible cannot be absorbed into cognition or systematized as knowledge:

The same and the other cannot enter into a cognition that would encompass them; the relations that the separated being maintains with what transcends it are not produced on the ground of totality, do not crystallize into a system. ... It involves a calling into question of oneself, a critical attitude which is itself produced in face of the other and under his authority. [...] The face-to-face remains an ultimate situation. (Lévinas 80–81)

Universities institutionalize this interruption. They do not guarantee enlightenment; they preserve the conditions under which claims may be tested without being immunized against dissent. Contrary-wise, *indoctrination eliminates risk by foreclosing response*. Education, properly understood, accepts risk as its ethical price. Education never suspends freedom: what is at stake is the ethics of the encounter. Lévinas insists that the relation enacted in teaching does not confirm the sovereignty of the subject, but places it under judgment—not in order to command obedience, but *to prevent freedom from collapsing into self-certainty*. Teaching, in this sense, is not the transmission of content nor the enforcement of doctrine, but an *as-sociation* that calls freedom itself into question:

But what can it mean that the teacher who calls forth attention exceeds the consciousness? How is the teacher outside of the consciousness he teaches? He is not exterior to it as the content thought is exterior to the thought that thinks it; this exteriority is assumed by thought, and in this sense does not *overflow* the consciousness. Nothing that concerns thought can overflow it; everything is freely assumed. *Nothing—except the judge judging the very freedom of thought*. The presence of the Master who by his word gives meaning to phenomena and permits them to be thematized is not open to an objective knowing; this presence is in society with me. The presence of being in the phenomenon, which breaks the charm of the bewitched world, which utters the *yes* of which the I is incapable, which brings the preeminent positivity of the Other, is ipso facto as-sociation. But the reference to commencement is not a knowing of the commencement; quite the contrary: every objectification already refers to this reference. Association, a preeminent experience of being, does not disclose. One may call it a disclosure of what is revealed—the experience of a face; but one thus conjures away the originality of this disclosure. In this disclosure there disappears precisely the consciousness of solitary certitude in which every knowing is enacted, even that one can have of a face. Certitude rests, in fact, on my freedom, and is in this sense solitary. Whether it be through a priori concepts which enable me to assume the given, or whether it be by adherence of the will (as in Descartes), it is finally my freedom alone that takes the responsibility for the true. As-sociation, the welcoming of the master, is the opposite course: in it the exercise of my freedom is called in question. If we call a situation where my freedom is called in question conscience, association or the welcoming of the Other is conscience. (Lévinas 100)

Teaching is commonly understood as the transmission of content: something is presented, evaluated, and either accepted or rejected by a subject whose freedom of judgment remains intact throughout the process. Even when learning is demanding, consciousness appears *sovereign*, since assent ultimately belongs to the learner. What Lévinas asks us to recognize, however, is a fundamentally different structure of address—one in which teaching does not merely offer something

to be known, but places the subject's very freedom under judgment. In such moments, the teacher does not confront the student as an object of cognition, but as an interlocutor whose presence renders indifference impossible. One is no longer deciding whether a given proposition is true; one finds oneself *answerable*. This answerability *precedes* comprehension and cannot be reduced to *agreement* or *refusal*. Crucially, it does not *abolish freedom*, but *interrupts its self-sufficiency*. The subject remains free, yet no longer sovereign over the terms on which truth appears. For Lévinas, this interruption is not a pedagogical failure or a lapse into authority as domination. It indicates the ethical origin of teaching itself: the point at which freedom encounters a demand it cannot fully assume, and consciousness discovers that it is not alone.

Philosophically, Lévinas's argument evolves by undoing the deeply ingrained assumption about how *anything* can address us at all—namely, that whatever confronts consciousness must do so as an object *available for cognition*. Ordinarily, consciousness secures itself through *mastery*: it assumes contents, applies a priori forms, and takes responsibility for truth through the freedom to assent or withhold assent. Even certainty, in this model, remains an achievement of freedom. From this perspective, nothing that concerns *thought* can exceed *consciousness*—except, as Lévinas insists, the judgment of that very freedom. The teacher is therefore “outside” consciousness not as an external object, but as the one whose presence interrupts this economy of assumption by calling freedom itself into question. Teaching, on this account, neither transmits content nor solicits agreement; it exposes the subject to a claim that cannot be fully appropriated, neutralized, or mastered. This exposure does not occur within cognition, nor through reciprocal exchange, but in what Lévinas calls *as-sociation*: an ethical *being-with* that breaks the solitude of certainty without abolishing freedom. Language here does not begin as dialogue between equals, but as an *irreversible address*, in which the interlocutor remains beyond the system of my knowing. What Lévinas names “mastery” in this context does not denote domination, but the irreducible exteriority of the Other, whose presence judges freedom and thereby renders responsibility—and truth—possible. It is this interruption of sovereign consciousness that opens onto the concrete life of conscience.

The originality of this situation does not only lie in the formal antithesis it represents with regard to the cognitive consciousness. The calling in question of oneself is all the more severe the more rigorously the self is in control of itself. This receding of the goal in the very measure one approaches it is the life of conscience. The increase of my exigencies with regard to myself aggravates the judgment that is borne upon me, increases my responsibility. It is in this very

concrete sense that the judgment that is borne upon me is never assumed by me. This inability to assume is the very life, the essence, of conscience. My freedom does not have the last word; I am not alone. And we shall say then that conscience alone leaves itself. In other words again, in conscience I have an experience that is not commensurate with any a priori framework—a conceptless experience. Every other experience is conceptual, that is, becomes my own or arises from my freedom. [...] Conscience and desire are not modalities of consciousness among others, but its condition. Concretely they are the welcoming of the Other across his judgment. (Lévinas 100–101)

Freedom is indispensable for Lévinas because responsibility can only be addressed to a subject who remains capable of refusal; ethical judgment does not abolish freedom, but exposes it to a demand that it did not originate, and cannot finally discharge. Judgment here is not a form of *predication* or *evaluation* performed by consciousness, but its ethical questioning: an address that places consciousness itself in question prior to any conceptual determination. What Lévinas calls conscience is therefore not a moral faculty added to cognition, but the experience in which the subject discovers that its freedom is no longer sovereign. This discovery does not arise from confusion or weakness, but from lucid self-mastery encountering a responsibility that expands rather than contracts as one strives to meet it. Conscience lives in this paradoxical movement: the more rigorously the self governs itself, the more severely it is called into question. Lévinas names this insatiability “desire”—which, however, is not conceived as *a lack seeking fulfillment*, but an *openness* to what cannot be possessed or mastered. Conscience and desire are thus not *modalities* of consciousness among others, but the *condition* of conscious interaction with the world, because they mark the point at which the self is no longer enclosed within itself. Concretely, this condition takes the form of “welcoming the Other across his judgment”—a relation that cannot remain *internal to the subject*, but necessarily unfolds *between persons*. It is at this juncture that Lévinas turns from the interior life of conscience to the ethical structure of teaching and language, insisting that truth does not arise from inward recollection, but from a transitive relation in which the self is addressed by an irreducibly exterior other:

The transitivity of teaching, and not the interiority of reminiscence, manifests being; the locus of truth is society. The *moral* relation with the Master who judges me subtends the freedom of my adherence to the true. Thus language commences. He who speaks to me and across the words proposes himself to me retains the fundamental foreignness of the Other who judges me; our relations are never reversible. This supremacy posits him in himself, outside of my knowing, and it is by relation to this absolute that the *given* takes on meaning. The “communication” of ideas, the reciprocity of dialogue, already hide

the profound essence of language. It resides in the irreversibility of the relation between me and the other, in the Mastery of the Master coinciding with his position as other and as exterior. For language can be spoken only if the interlocutor is the commencement of his discourse, if, consequently, he remains beyond the system, if he is not *on the same plane* as myself. The interlocutor is not a Thou, he is a You; he reveals himself in his lordship. Thus exteriority coincides with a mastery. My freedom is thus challenged by a Master who can invest it. Truth, the sovereign exercise of freedom, becomes henceforth possible. (Lévinas 101)

In this final movement, Lévinas completes his shift from an ethics of conscience to an ethics of teaching and language by rejecting any account of truth grounded in inward recollection or self-transparent reflection. Against philosophical traditions that locate meaning in “interiority” or “reminiscence,” he insists that it is the “transitivity of teaching” that “manifests being,” because truth does not arise from the subject’s return to itself but from being addressed by another. For this reason, “the locus of truth is society”—not in the sense of consensus, exchange, or agreement, but insofar as truth becomes possible only where freedom is exposed to judgment rather than secured against it. The “*moral* relation with the Master who judges me” does not negate freedom; it “subtends the freedom of my adherence to the true,” making assent meaningful rather than arbitrary. It is at this point, Lévinas writes, that “language commences,” yet it does not simply “commence” as communication or reciprocity, but as *ethical address*.

In other words, the one who speaks “retains the fundamental foreignness of the Other who judges me,” and this relation is “never reversible,” because responsibility does not depend on symmetry. The Other remains “outside of my knowing,” not as an object beyond reach, but as an *absolute exteriority* in relation to which “the *given*” takes on meaning at all. It is precisely this exteriority that Lévinas names “mastery”: not domination, command, or authority enforced from above, but the *refusal of assimilation*—the impossibility of reducing the Other to my system, my concepts, or my freedom. The Master is a master *not because he controls*, but because *he cannot be mastered*. He does not override freedom; he questions freedom’s tendency to coincide with itself. This is why Lévinas can insist that even the “communication of ideas” or the “reciprocity of dialogue” may obscure the essence of language, insofar as they suggest symmetry where ethical irreversibility is at stake. Language, he argues, is possible only if the interlocutor “remains beyond the system,” as the “commencement of his discourse,” not “on the same plane as myself.” Hence the striking formulation: “the interlocutor is not a Thou; he is a You.” As opposed to *Thou*,

the *You*—once a plural form denoting politeness or hierarchy—in the philosopher’s understanding denotes the irreducible exteriority of the other whose address preserves distance and responsibility. In this exact sense, “exteriority coincides with mastery,” and it is only because “my freedom is thus challenged by a Master who can invest it”—that is, *inform with weight*, stakes, and answerability—that “truth, the sovereign exercise of freedom, becomes henceforth possible.”

As follows, Lévinas’s account of teaching and language does not at all authorize indoctrination; on the contrary: it makes apparent why indoctrination is conceptually *parasitic* on the very freedom it claims to defend. The professor who “judges” does not replace the student’s thinking with doctrine, nor does the asymmetry of the pedagogical relation license command or submission. What it names instead is the ethical situation in which thought becomes answerable to what it cannot fully anticipate, absorb, or control. Freedom is not suspended here but intensified, because it is not exercised as self-affirmation but as responsiveness—a willingness to be addressed, corrected, and obligated without being coerced. Far from closing inquiry, this exposure prevents freedom from hardening into certainty or collapsing into self-reference. Education thus appears neither as neutral exchange nor as enforced transmission, but as the maintenance of a space in which judgment remains possible *precisely* because it is never final. In this light, the familiar charge of indoctrination misidentifies what it claims to oppose.

Analyzed in this perspective, the accusation that universities undermine freedom by placing it under judgment mistakes ethical exposure for constraint. Indoctrination seeks to protect freedom by insulating it from challenge, reducing responsibility to assent or refusal. Education, as Lévinas understands it, does the opposite: it intensifies freedom by exposing it to an authority that cannot be mastered, instrumentalized, or converted into doctrine. The university does not negate autonomy; it refuses to let autonomy close in upon itself.

This emphasis on exposure rather than insulation also clarifies the place of dialogue. In Martin Buber’s terms, indoctrination corresponds to an *I–It* relation, in which knowledge circulates as an object to be possessed or rejected. Education, by contrast, depends on the preservation of an *I–Thou* relation—one that resists reduction to utility, symmetry, or reassurance. Lévinas seems to radicalize this insight by insisting that relation does not culminate in *reciprocity*, but in *responsibility*: not mutual agreement, but the *endurance of address*. The “You” marks precisely this ethical asymmetry—the presence of the other

as irreducibly exterior—whose interruption prevents freedom from collapsing into self-certainty.

The fantasy of indoctrination becomes even harder to sustain in the context of translocal knowledge systems. American knowledge has always been shaped by contact zones rather than doctrinal centers. Ideas central to US intellectual life—democracy, sovereignty, freedom, race, labor—have circulated across oceans and borders, absorbing contradictions and contestations along the way. Universities serve as sites where these circulations become legible: where students do not encounter a single narrative, but competing genealogies that refuse easy synthesis. What appears as indoctrination to those seeking closure is often an effect of the misreading of the disorientation that inevitably accompanies genuine encounter.

For these reasons, anyone demanding that universities deliver unambiguous moral reassurance displays a profound misunderstanding of their task. Knowledge that never unsettles the limits of one's comfort zone is not *knowledge* but *affirmation*. Hospitality, in this context, is the practice of the ethical courage to remain open to what arrives without advance assurance of comfort or agreement. *The university that practices such hospitality does not produce loyal subjects; it produces interlocutors—individuals capable of inhabiting disagreement without converting it into enmity.*

UNCERTAINTY, AUTHORITY, AND THE DEMAND FOR CERTITUDE

Modern public discourse often treats uncertainty as a moral failure. Claims that do not arrive fully formed, unambiguous, and final are suspected of concealment or bad faith. In this climate, institutions that traffic openly in provisional knowledge—science, scholarship, historical inquiry—are accused not merely of error, but of deception. Authority is demanded in the form of certainty, and when certainty cannot be delivered, authority itself is declared illegitimate. The result, of course, is a paradox: the more honestly uncertainty is acknowledged, the more aggressively trust is withdrawn. Yet this expectation rests on a model of authority that Enlightenment thinkers explicitly rejected. For Immanuel Kant, maturity does not consist in being spared uncertainty, but in assuming responsibility for judgment where guarantees are unavailable. Enlightenment, on this account, is not the replacement of one authority by another, but the refusal of tutelage as such.

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. *Immaturity* is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is *self-imposed* when its cause lies not in lack of understand-

ing, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere aude!* “Have courage to use your own understanding!”—that is the motto of enlightenment. (Kant, *An Answer*)

In modern era, ever since the onset of Enlightenment, thinkers have long warned against this confusion. Kant’s refusal of tutelage rests on the conviction that maturity consists not in being spared uncertainty, but in learning to reason within it. Authority worthy of respect does not eliminate ambiguity; it accompanies judgment where guarantees are unavailable. Universities, when they remain faithful to this task, do not promise security of belief. They cultivate the capacity to live with incomplete knowledge without surrendering responsibility. This posture is easily misread as weakness by those who equate authority with command rather than counsel.

Nothing is required for this enlightenment, however, except freedom; and the freedom in question is the least harmful of all, namely, the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters. But on all sides I hear: “*Do not argue!*” The officer says, “Do not argue, drill!” The tax man says, “Do not argue, pay!” The pastor says, “Do not argue, believe!” (Only one ruler in the world says, “*Argue* as much as you want and about what you want, *but obey!*”³) In this we have [examples of] pervasive restrictions on freedom. But which restriction hinders enlightenment, and which does not, but instead actually advances it? I reply: the *public* use of one’s reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among mankind; the *private* use of reason may, however, often be very narrowly restricted, without otherwise hindering the progress of enlightenment. (Kant, *An Answer*)

Kant’s distinction does not weaken authority; it specifies its conditions. Authority, in his view, does not rest on eliminating disagreement, but on sustaining a space in which judgment can be exercised without coercion. The *public* use of reason names the scholar’s responsibility to address others as capable of judgment rather than as subjects requiring protection from uncertainty. By contrast, the *private* use of reason refers to the functional obedience required within specific institutional roles. Confusing these two domains produces the error that fuels contemporary accusations against universities: the belief that public disagreement constitutes institutional betrayal rather than intellectual responsibility. The philosopher explains further:

By the public use of one’s own reason I understand the use that anyone, as a *scholar*, makes of reason before the entire *literate world*. I call the private use of reason that which a person may make in a *civic post* or office that has been entrusted to him. In many affairs conducted in the interests of a community, a certain

3 Frederick II (The Great) of Prussia (Translator’s note).

mechanism is required by means of which some of its members must conduct themselves in an entirely passive manner, so that through an artificial unanimity the government may guide them toward public ends, or at least prevent them from destroying such ends. Here one certainly must not argue; instead one must obey. However, insofar as this same person also regards himself as a member of the community as a whole, or even of the world community, and as a consequence addresses the public in the role of a scholar, in the proper sense of that term, he can most certainly argue, without thereby harming the affairs for which, as a passive member, he is partly responsible. (Kant, *The Answer*)

What Kant establishes here is not a hierarchy of obedience over thought, but a distinction between roles: obedience governs action within an entrusted office, while reason retains its full critical authority when addressed to the public as such. The same individual may therefore be bound to comply in practice and yet remain fully entitled—and indeed obligated—to question, criticize, and revise the principles governing that practice when speaking as a scholar. Kant clarifies this distinction through a series of concrete cases that show how public reasoning not only survives institutional constraint but depends upon it for its proper scope and responsibility:

Thus it would be disastrous if an officer on duty who was given a command by his superior were to question the appropriateness or utility of the order. He must obey. But as a scholar he cannot be justly constrained from making comments about errors in military service or from placing them before the public for its judgment. The citizen cannot refuse to pay the taxes imposed on him; indeed, impertinent criticism of such levies, when they should be paid, can be punished as a scandal. But the same person does not act contrary to civic duty when, as a scholar, he publicly expresses his thoughts regarding the impropriety or even injustice of such taxes. Likewise a pastor is bound to instruct his congregation in accordance with the symbol of the church he serves, for he was appointed on that condition. But as a scholar he has complete freedom—indeed, even the calling—to impart to the public all of his carefully considered and well-intentioned thoughts concerning mistaken aspects of that symbol, as well as his suggestions for the better arrangement of religious and church matters. [...] Thus an appointed teacher's use of his reason for the sake of his congregation is merely *private*, because, however large the congregation is, this use is always only domestic; in this regard, as a priest, he is not free and cannot be such because he is acting under instructions from someone else. By contrast, the cleric, as a scholar who speaks through his writings to the public as such—that is, to the world—enjoys in this *public use* of reason an unrestricted freedom to use his own rational capacities and to speak his own mind. For that the (spiritual) guardians of a people should themselves be immature is an absurdity that would insure the perpetuation of absurdities. (Kant, *An Answer*)

Kant thus offers a powerful account of authority *without tutelage*: an authority grounded not in certainty, command, or protection from

error, but in the freedom of public judgment exercised under conditions of risk. Yet Kant also writes at a moment when the institutional conditions of authority—church, state, university—still appeared capable of sustaining this distinction between obedience in action and freedom in thought. What his account does not yet fully confront is what happens when this distinction collapses in practice: when public reasoning itself is re-described as a threat, and when uncertainty is no longer tolerated as the price of freedom but denounced as evidence of illegitimacy. It is distinctly this historical transformation that Hannah Arendt will later diagnose by showing how modern demands for certainty convert authority into coercion and substitute violence for judgment.

The demand for certainty reveals its own parochialism especially when one observes that knowledge, shaped by local histories, material conditions, and epistemic traditions that do not align seamlessly, circulates unevenly across borders. Hemispheric and transoceanic American studies have repeatedly shown that what counts as evidence, relevance, or urgency *in a given context*—shifts as ideas move *between contexts*. Universities function as mediating spaces where these shifts can be examined, their validity being acknowledged rather than denied. Insistence on a single, unchanging truth in such conditions is not fidelity to reality, but resistance to its complexity.

Hospitality offers a crucial ethical corrective to such a position. To host another's claim is not to accept it uncritically, but to grant it the dignity of being heard and examined. This requires patience with uncertainty and restraint in judgment. The alternative—demanding immediate closure—turns disagreement into threat and inquiry into suspicion. Universities that acknowledge uncertainty do not abdicate authority; they practice it responsibly. They refuse the false comfort of final answers in favor of a more demanding ethic: remaining answerable to evidence, to critique, and to those who must live with the consequences of knowledge that is always, inevitably, incomplete.

EMERGENCY, ETHICS, AND THE LIMITS OF SCIENTIFIC AUTHORITY

States of emergency exert a peculiar pressure on knowledge. In moments of pandemics, environmental crises, or large-scale social disruptions, scientific expertise is asked to speak with a decisiveness that exceeds its own epistemic conditions. What is sought is not *judgment under uncertainty*, but *certainty itself*—final, unambiguous, and, most importantly, *enforceable*. When such certainty cannot be delivered, provisional findings are reinterpreted as evasions, and revision is mis-

taken for duplicity. Institutions devoted to inquiry are then accused not merely of error, but of illegitimate power—of having assumed an authority they were never entitled to exercise, especially if the outcomes fail to satisfy the propagandist ambitions of the funding bodies.

This pattern is not historically new. Hannah Arendt's work situates such accusations within a longer crisis of authority that predates contemporary emergencies, but, as it seems, becomes especially visible under their pressure.

This crisis, apparent since the inception of the century, is political in origin and nature. The rise of political movements intent upon replacing the party system, and the development of a new totalitarian form of government, took place against a background of a more or less general, more or less dramatic breakdown of all traditional authorities. Nowhere was this breakdown the direct result of the regimes or movements themselves; it rather seemed as though totalitarianism, in the form of movements as well as of regimes, was best fitted to take advantage of a general political and social atmosphere in which the party system had lost its prestige and the government's authority was no longer recognized. (Arendt, *Between Past and Future* 91–92)

What distinguishes this crisis of authority, is not simply the erosion of trust in particular institutions, but the collapse of the conceptual frameworks through which authority itself was once understood:

The most significant symptom of the crisis, indicating its depth and seriousness, is that it has spread to such prepolitical areas as child-rearing and education, where authority in the widest sense has always been accepted as a natural necessity, obviously required as much by natural needs, the helplessness of the child, as by political necessity, the continuity of an established civilization which can be assured only if those who are newcomers by birth are guided through a pre-established world into which they are born as strangers. Because of its simple and elementary character, this form of authority has, throughout the history of political thought, served as a model for a great variety of authoritarian forms of government, so that the fact that even this prepolitical authority which ruled the relations between adults and children, teachers and pupils, is no longer secure signifies that all the old time-honored metaphors and models for authoritarian relations have lost their plausibility. Practically as well as theoretically, we are no longer in a position to know what authority really is. (Arendt, *Between Past and Future* 92)

In emergency conditions, this loss of conceptual clarity becomes politically volatile. When authority is no longer intelligible on its own terms, it is easily conflated with whatever forms of power remain visible—command, enforcement, and control. Advisory expertise, precisely because it cannot compel compliance or guarantee outcomes, is then recoded as domination the moment it fails to deliver certainty.

Arendt therefore insists on a distinction that “emergency rhetoric” persistently obscures:

Since authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed. Authority, on the other hand, is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance. Against the egalitarian order of persuasion stands the authoritarian order, which is always hierarchical. If authority is to be defined at all, then, it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments. (The authoritarian relation between the one who commands and the one who obeys rests neither on common reason nor on the power of the one who commands; what they have in common is the hierarchy itself, whose rightness and legitimacy both recognize and where both have their predetermined stable place.). (Arendt, *Between Past and Future* 92–93)

This dynamic has clear historical precedents. Twentieth-century regimes that governed through permanent states of emergency repeatedly targeted academic and scientific institutions not because they were politically neutral, but because they embodied forms of authority that could not be fully subordinated to command. In Nazi Germany, disciplines ranging from anthropology and biology to history and philology were reorganized to conform to racial doctrine, while research that resisted ideological closure was denounced as decadent, foreign, or subversive. In the Soviet Union, the natural sciences, humanities, and economics alike were subjected to political litmus tests that transformed provisional inquiry into enforced certainty, with catastrophic consequences for both knowledge and life. In each case, in eyes of the totalitarian regimes, the problem was not that science claimed too much authority, but that it claimed *the wrong kind*: authority grounded in judgment, evidence, and revisability rather than in ideological finality. Emergency governance thus did not merely suppress dissent; it redefined the conditions of legitimacy themselves, recoding uncertainty as betrayal and expertise as conspiracy. Anti-intellectualism, in this sense, is not a cultural accident but a recurrent political strategy, activated when authority can no longer tolerate the ethical limits of knowledge.

What these histories make visible is a structural contradiction at the heart of authoritarian emergency politics. Knowledge is tolerated only so long as it can be made to serve predetermined ends. When research produces stable, well-founded conclusions that conflict with ideological objectives, it is dismissed as corrupt, foreign, or politically motivated. When, by contrast, inquiry remains necessarily

provisional—when evidence is incomplete, contested, or evolving—it is denounced as evasive, incompetent, or unworthy of public trust. Certainty becomes suspect when it resists power; uncertainty becomes suspect when it resists instrumentalization. In both cases, the problem is not epistemic failure but ethical independence. Institutions of knowledge are thus placed in a double bind: condemned either for knowing too much or for not knowing enough, depending on what political authority requires at a given moment. Emergency discourse does not merely exploit uncertainty; it weaponizes the very conditions under which responsible knowledge is produced.

What states of emergency—whether genuine or politically manufactured—therefore intensify is not simply the demand for compliance, but the expectation that authority should eliminate uncertainty altogether *while remaining obedient to power*. Authority is no longer recognized as a relation sustained by judgment and trust, but reimaged as a capacity to command outcomes, guarantee safety, and confirm political narratives in advance. Where such guarantees fail to materialize, authority is declared fraudulent. The crisis Arendt describes thus becomes operative in a new register: institutions that can neither coerce nor persuade, but only advise under conditions of risk, are experienced not as *authoritative* but as *evasive*. Emergency rhetoric does not create this confusion; it exploits it, translating uncertainty into suspicion and responsibility into liability.

What emergency discourse ultimately reveals, then, is not the overreach of scientific authority but its systematic misrecognition. Scientific expertise neither commands nor coerces; it does not operate through force, nor does it persuade by offering moral absolution or political reassurance. It advises under conditions of uncertainty—and it is precisely this refusal to collapse judgment into certainty, or evidence into loyalty, that renders it suspect. When authority is expected to function as domination, its ethical form becomes unintelligible, and responsibility is reinterpreted as weakness.

This accusation rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of both science and authority. Scientific knowledge does not govern; *it advises*. Its claims are conditional, probabilistic, and open to revision as evidence accumulates. Kant's distinction between enlightenment and tutelage remains instructive here: to be enlightened is not to be spared uncertainty, but to be treated as capable of reasoning within it. *Demands that expertise eliminate risk or moral ambiguity mistake knowledge for command and counsel for coercion. They ask of science what only ideology can provide: infallibility without accountability.*

The demand for absolute scientific certainty appears especially untenable when one broadens one's scope of inquiry. Emergencies do not unfold uniformly across regions, cultures, or political systems. Public health knowledge, for example, circulates through vastly different infrastructures, histories of trust and mistrust, and material constraints. Universities and research institutions operate as transnational nodes within these circulations, translating findings across contexts rather than imposing them wholesale. Insistence on interpreting this translational labor as domination is nothing but misreading mediation as control.

Again, hospitality as a concept offers a more adequate ethical framework. To offer guidance under conditions of uncertainty is not to dominate, but to accept responsibility for one's best judgment in the absence of guarantees. In theological terms, this posture aligns more closely with humility than with sovereignty. It acknowledges finitude without retreating into silence. Universities, when they function properly, cultivate this exact stance: the capacity to say "this is what we know now," while remaining open to correction, lies at the core of their mission. To reject such counsel because it cannot promise absolute safety is not an act of moral seriousness; it is a refusal of the shared vulnerability upon which any ethical community—scientific, political, or civic—ultimately depends.

UNCERTAINTY AS CARE: MEDICINE, EVIDENCE, AND RESPONSIBILITY

It is therefore necessary to distinguish between genuine emergencies and those deliberately manufactured for political or economic gain. Pandemics such as COVID-19, environmental disasters like Hurricane Katrina, or the long-term contamination of water and land in Indigenous territories are not rhetorical constructs; they are material crises that unfold regardless of political acknowledgment and exact their cost in human lives. Other "emergencies," by contrast, are engineered: abrupt tariff regimes, regulatory shocks, or policy reversals designed to produce volatility, consolidate authority, or enable speculative profit for those positioned to anticipate reversal. These manufactured crises do not arise from uncertainty; they instrumentalize it. Yet authoritarian politics treats both forms through the same distorted logic. When genuine crises demand humility before complex and evolving evidence, uncertainty is denounced as incompetence or bad faith. When instability is deliberately produced, uncertainty is invoked to justify exceptional measures and suspend accountability. In both

cases, what is rejected is not uncertainty itself, but the ethical limits it imposes on power.

Perhaps the one discipline in which these limits become particularly obvious is medicine. Medical knowledge does not operate at a safe distance from lived experience; it intervenes directly in bodies, identities, and futures. Decisions must often be made before evidence has stabilized, and care must be extended unconditionally, even without any promise of cure. Under such conditions, uncertainty is not a flaw to be eliminated but a condition to be borne responsibly. To treat this condition as deception is to misunderstand not only medicine, but the moral grammar of care itself.

This misunderstanding persists in part because *care*, not unlike education, is often mistaken for *control*, and philosophical debates on hospitality enhance one's understanding why this conflation may be so seductive—and why it is dangerous. To care for another is to accept exposure to their vulnerability without claiming mastery over its outcome. In the medical context, Lévinas's insistence that *responsibility precedes knowledge* resonates powerfully: the obligation to *respond* arises *before* certainty is achieved. Evidence-based medicine does not *promise* final truths; it practices disciplined attentiveness—ongoing evaluation, transparency about limits, and a willingness to revise judgment as new information emerges. Universities and teaching hospitals remain among the few institutions structurally committed to sustaining this attentiveness, even when it generates disagreement rather than reassurance.

The ethical stakes of medical uncertainty become still sharper when viewed across national borders. Transnationally, medical knowledge is shaped not only by essential philosophical differences in defining health (for instance, Western medicine is often juxtaposed with, rather than complemented by, Indigenous or Eastern medicine), but also by disparities in infrastructure, culturally rooted histories of trust and mistrust, and divergent political conditions. What counts as responsible care in one context may require careful adaptation in another. Needless to say, universities function as mediating spaces within these circulations, translating research into practice without erasing contextual difference, but adopting any position that demands uniform certainty across such uneven terrain is a gesture that could not be further from realism; it is abstraction masquerading as rigor.

Public debates about medicine also tend to neglect a theological dimension long present in traditions of care. Ethical frameworks grounded in compassion, humility, and the sanctity of life have never equated care with control. Medical knowledge cannot speak

with a single, unchanging voice: to require it politically is to impose upon the audience a false image of authority—one that denies finitude of means (intellectual and otherwise) and treats vulnerability as a scandal. A hospitable medical ethic does the opposite. It assumes that patients and communities are capable of engaging complexity when it is offered honestly. In this sense, uncertainty becomes the opposite of the negation of care: it is one its expressions—a refusal to simplify processes of life in order to protect doctrines, and a commitment to remain answerable to those whose lives are at stake.

SPEECH, FEAR, AND THE MISUSE OF “TOTALITARIANISM”

What ultimately links the controversies surrounding expertise, medicine, and emergency governance is not merely a conflict over ideas, but a struggle over bodies. States of emergency—whether genuine or manufactured—do not ask only for belief; they demand compliance at the level of *embodied life experience*. Health, movement, labor, reproduction, and exposure to risk, become objects of political management. In such conditions, authority is no longer evaluated by the quality of its judgment but by its capacity to discipline outcomes: to secure obedience, enforce conformity, and neutralize vulnerability. Knowledge that cannot guarantee such control—because it remains provisional, revisable, and ethically restrained—appears intolerable. Uncertainty becomes politically dangerous not because it is false, but because it resists the conversion of judgment into command. The suspicion directed at scientific and academic institutions thus converges with a deeper anxiety: the fear that bodies capable of judgment are bodies that cannot be fully governed.

It is within this atmosphere that the language of *totalitarianism* is increasingly—and recklessly—invoked. Indeed, few terms in modern political vocabulary carry comparable moral weight. Totalitarianism, of course, refers to regimes defined by enforced unanimity, the eradication of dissent, and the systematic transformation of free thinking into obedience. When this language is applied to universities, the effect is rhetorically explosive but conceptually incoherent. Institutions hosting visible disagreement, welcoming internal critique, and open to public contestation are redescribed as *spaces of terror*—not because *they prohibit speech*, but because speech is *consequential*. This charge functions less as diagnosis than as displacement: the anxiety produced by pluralism is projected onto the institution that refuses to dissolve disagreement into silence, and when it insists on this refusal, it risks retaliatory actions on the part of the political bodies that govern funding.

What is displaced in this gesture becomes clearer once speech itself is taken seriously as an ethical relation. To speak in a shared space is to risk being answered, challenged, or refused. Fear arises not where speech is forbidden, but where speech matters—where others are present and cannot be neutralized in advance. Again, in this context, Martin Buber's distinction between *I-It* and *I-Thou* relations returns as particularly instructive. An *I-It* world permits speech without consequence: "others" are "objects" to be managed, instrumentalized, or ignored. An *I-Thou* world exposes the speaker to relation, and therefore to vulnerability. Universities, at their best, insist on this exposure. They do not promise immunity from offense or conflict; they preserve the conditions under which response remains possible and responsibility cannot be deferred.

Transoceanic, but also pan-American, perspectives sharpen image of the blatant misuse of the concept in reference to the academia. The histories that give *totalitarianism* its meaning are not abstract scenarios, but lived realities across Europe, Latin America, Asia, and beyond. These are tragic histories of censorship, surveillance, imprisonment, torture, vanishment, and non-answerability. As a rule, in countries under totalitarian regimes, universities have been among the first targets of authoritarian consolidation *precisely* because they sustain spaces of critique that cannot be fully disciplined. To apply the concept of totalitarianism as a descriptor of institutions that welcome protest and dissent, adjudicate conflict publicly, and submit themselves to legal and ethical scrutiny is not merely inaccurate: it empties the term of its historical substance and obscures the very forms of domination it was meant to name.

An intellectually hospitable culture therefore demands restraint as well as courage. Disagreement is not persecution; accountability is not terror. The willingness to remain in relation under conditions of conflict—to speak without the guarantee of affirmation and to listen without the promise of comfort—is not a symptom of tyranny. On the contrary: it is one of the few remaining signs of democratic vitality. A politician who abandons this labor in favor of a rhetoric of enmity does not engage in an act of resistance: she retreats from the ethical demands that shared speech inevitably entails.

DEBT, ACCESS, AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF WELCOME

What this rhetoric of fear ultimately conceals is that the governance of bodies and speech is inseparable from the governance of access. The same political imagination that recasts uncertainty as weakness

and disagreement as threat also treats education as a private risk to be individually borne, and not as a shared public responsibility. Universities are condemned for refusing ideological certainty while being compelled to operate within economic structures that determine “who may enter,” “who may remain,” and “at what cost.” Control thus shifts registers: where speech cannot be disciplined without resistance, futures can be disciplined through debt. Hostility toward universities therefore does not end at language or ideas; it extends into the material conditions under which learning is made possible. To understand how welcome is withdrawn, authority must be traced not only into classrooms and curricula, but into contracts, loans, and obligations that bind students long after speech has ended.

Anger over the cost of higher education is neither irrational nor misplaced. In the United States, the conversion of access to learning into a regime of long-term indebtedness has altered the very meaning of welcome. Entry into the university increasingly requires not only intellectual readiness, but a willingness to mortgage one’s future. When hospitality is extended on such terms, it risks becoming indistinguishable from extortion. Yet it is precisely here that a telling inversion occurs. Institutions structurally denied the resources to offer education as a public good are recast as the primary agents of exclusion, while the political and economic arrangements that make free or affordable education impossible recede from view. Responsibility is displaced downward, onto universities and their faculty, rather than upward, toward those who shape funding priorities, tax regimes, and public investment.

Hospitality, understood ethically, cannot be separated from material conditions. One cannot meaningfully welcome the other while demanding a price that forecloses freedom. Kant’s insistence on dignity—that persons must never be treated merely as means—casts a long shadow upon the ethical substratum of the system that conditions American education. The contemporary debt regime violates this principle not because professors mislead students, but because collective responsibility has been systematically withdrawn. As public funding declines and market logics advance, universities are pressed into roles they *did not choose*: revenue generators, credential vendors, risk managers. To treat these consequences as evidence of moral duplicity on the part of universities is to mistake structural coercion for pedagogical intent.

The contrast with other political choices is absolutely clear. Across much of Europe, higher education is treated as a public investment rather than a private wager: tuition is minimal or nonexistent, student

stipends are common, and access is understood as a matter of social continuity rather than individual speculation. That such models are dismissed as unrealistic while vast resources are devoted to spectacle, consolidation of wealth, or symbolic displays of sovereignty is not an economic necessity; it is a political decision. Political tendencies to indict universities for inequality while refusing to imagine, let alone implement, pan-American solutions to student debt, blatantly turn critique into deflection.

A broader analysis of the political economy of educational debt reveals deeper asymmetries across regions, classes, and racialized histories within the Americas. Transoceanic comparisons further complicate the picture, showing how divergent funding models reflect different assumptions about education's social purpose. Universities have been implicated in these inequalities, but they have also been among the primary sites where such patterns are documented, analyzed, and challenged. Much of the most sustained scholarship on student debt, labor precarity, and educational exclusion has emerged from within the academy itself. Crucially, however, a hospitable university does not deny these failures; it indicates them as requiring revisions. It is so, because university hospitality is not a function of benevolence but solidarity: an insistence that welcome must be affordable, that learning must not require lifelong penance, and that responsibility for education belongs not to individuals alone, but to the societies that claim to value it. Recasting this insistence as elitist deception, politicians either demonstrate their deep misunderstanding of the university's ethical direction, or manipulate their audiences on purpose, to sway them to dismiss the "uncomfortable" authority morally bound to seek zetetic truths. The real betrayal lies not in acknowledging the costs of education, but in normalizing those costs, like the costs of medical care, as unavoidable facts of life rather than political choices open to collective revision.

FEMINISM, LABOR, AND THE FALSE CHOICE BETWEEN CARE AND WORK

What these economic arrangements ultimately regulate is not only access to education, but the conditions under which lives can be lived at all. Debt disciplines *time* as much as it does *money*: it reorganizes futures, constrains choice, and casts dependency as a personal failure rather than a shared condition. When learning is framed as a private investment, the whole responsibility for sustaining life—care for children, elders, partners, and oneself—is silently shifted from collective structures onto individual endurance. Hospitality, under such condi-

tions, cannot be reduced to the moment of admission. It must also account for how societies distribute the ongoing work of sustaining vulnerability once entry has been granted.

It is at this juncture that contemporary critiques of universities take a familiar turn. The ethical language of care, interdependence, and relational responsibility—long central to debates about access and inequality—is reimagined as a cultural threat. Feminism, in particular, becomes a convenient target, one accused of “promoting overwork,” “eroding family life,” or “subordinating care to ambition.” Such framing, of course, rests upon an obvious paradox: what it marginalizes, or perhaps even strives to render null and void, is the fact that feminist scholarship has been among the most ardent critics of economic systems that demand total availability while systematically refusing to support the labor of care on which all productivity depends. The attack, then, is less a rejection of feminism than a refusal to confront what feminism makes visible: that the governance of education, debt, and labor is inseparable from the governance of care.

Public denunciations of universities frequently invoke feminism as a shorthand for moral and social decline—a doctrine reduced to caricature, blamed for careerism, demographic anxiety, or the dissolution of traditional bonds. This portrayal gains its force by compressing a heterogeneous intellectual tradition into a single accusatory image. Yet feminism, particularly as it has developed within academic contexts, has persistently challenged labor regimes that equate worth with output and treat care as a private inconvenience. *The problem, as feminist thinkers have long argued, is not the existence of work, but its organization: systems that deny human finitude, punish dependency, and externalize the costs of sustaining life.*

Yet, to welcome another is to acknowledge that lives are sustained not only by productivity, but by relations of care—relations that cannot be indefinitely outsourced without consequence. Feminist analyses of labor, social reproduction, and family life have repeatedly emphasized this point, insisting that care is neither a private indulgence nor a moral failure (if conditions make it impossible to grant), but a social practice upon which all others social subsystems depend. Universities are the primary sites where this insight has been articulated, even as they often struggle to efficiently turn it into institutional practice. Beyond doubt: that tension is real, but by no means can it be construed as evidence of deception. It is evidence of an *unresolved conflict* over how societies value care.

It is beyond question that in various economic models, both across the Americas and beyond, care is distributed differently—across genders,

classes, and borders—while “autonomy” is being elevated to an “unquestioned” ideal. Migrant labor, global care chains, and the feminization of precarity expose how deeply care is embedded in transnational circuits of work. Academic feminism did not invent these realities; it rendered them legible. Dismiss this scholarship as ideological excess, populist politicians refuse the ethical demand it poses: labor must be evaluated not only by efficiency or output, but by its effects on the fragile networks of care that sustain social, and individual, life.

There is, finally, yet another theological resonance worth recovering. Traditions that prize family, community, and covenant have long understood that *work is ordered toward life, not the reverse*. Politicians casting *care* and *labor* as mutually exclusive “goods” do not, therefore, propose a “conservative insight,” but a distinctly modern distortion. A genuinely hospitable vision of education refuses to condone this evidently false choice. It recognizes that intellectual labor and relational life do not stand in opposition, but are *interdependent* forms of human flourishing. When universities are accused of privileging one at the expense of the other, the more pressing question is whether our economic and cultural systems have made it possible for either to thrive without sacrifice.

ENVIRONMENT, EXTRACTION, AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF INHOSPITALITY

What the preceding debates ultimately expose is that hospitality is never only a matter of speech, norms, or institutional culture. It is also a question of *where* vulnerability is permitted to settle—and where it is displaced. The same political imagination that treats care as a private burden and education as an individual risk extends this logic outward, redistributing exposure across landscapes as readily as it does across lives. When societies refuse to bear uncertainty collectively, they do not eliminate it; they relocate it onto other bodies, other regions, other futures. The governance of care thus shades imperceptibly into the governance of space, and the ethics of labor into the politics of land. It is here that the question of hospitality reaches its environmental limit: in decisions about *whose soil may be poisoned, whose water may be sacrificed, and whose livelihoods are rendered collateral* in the pursuit of stability elsewhere.

Environmental debates in contemporary political rhetoric are often staged as moral theater: spectacles that allow some to signal virtue while others absorb loss. This framing gains traction where environmental policy is experienced primarily as displacement of jobs, of industries, of inherited ways of life—rather than as shared responsibility. Yet this

drama obscures a more unsettling truth: the large-scale relocation of labor and pollution is not an unintended consequence of environmental concern; it is the predictable outcome of economic systems that have long treated certain places and populations as expendable. What is at stake, then, is not just the hypocrisy of political rhetoric. It is the geography of suffering: the patterned distribution of harm across space.

Postcolonial and decolonial approaches to hospitality put this insight in sharp focus. They remind us that welcome and exclusion are never fairly distributed, and that the comforts of some are routinely secured through the exposure of others. Extraction, offshoring, and environmental degradation follow historical routes shaped by empire, capital, and the asymmetry of sovereignty. Universities have played their part in these histories, but it is also the universities that trace such patterns, expose them, study, and propose the remedial measures to inflicted harm. Environmental humanities and social sciences have insisted—often against political convenience—that ecological consequences of capitalist economy cannot be understood apart from the human lives it affects.

Hemispheric and transoceanic American Studies demonstrate that the geography of inhospitality has always-already been unavoidable. The Americas have long functioned as laboratories of extraction, where land, labor, and resources circulate outward while costs remain localized. Transpacific and transatlantic supply chains further complicate responsibility, binding consumption in one region to degradation in another. Universities, operating across these circuits, realize a part of their mission by rendering such connections visible. Populists dismissals of this work as elitist moralism are not merely tantamount to irrational rejection of a scholarly perspective; such acts refuse the ethical demand that the findings of such research pose: hospitality worthy of its name extends beyond national borders and immediate self-interest.

A genuinely hospitable environmental ethic neither denies the suffering of displaced workers nor sanctifies policy abstraction. It insists instead on a broader frame of responsibility—one that asks how environmental harm is distributed, who is expected to bear it, and on what grounds is the burden delegated for some, and not others, to carry. Kant's intuition that the earth's surface belongs to all in common acquires renewed urgency in an era of climate displacement. Hospitality, in this sense, is not a matter of moral comfort or symbolic gesture. It is the difficult labor of acknowledging entanglement and refusing solutions that merely relocate vulnerability elsewhere.

Environmental displacement not only exposes a systematically traceable geography of inhospitality, but also its temporal dimension. Analyzed from a diachronic perspective, decisions about whose land may be sacrificed, whose labor may be exhausted, and whose lives may be rendered expendable do not arise spontaneously; they are inherited, normalized, and reproduced across generations. Extraction follows routes long cleared by law, custom, and memory. Refusing inquiry into these histories, therefore, politicians do not defend *neutrality*: on the contrary, they actively *protect continuity*, allowing structures of advantage and exposure, which no longer are “visible” as intentional, to persist.

When these issues are at stake, resistance to historical analysis becomes most pronounced. When the past is declared irrelevant, closed, or morally settled, present arrangements can be officially construed as “natural” rather than “produced.” Historical attention is then presented to the public as threat: universities are shown as institutions casting accusations, rather than providing explanations and solutions. The language of “division” and “resentment” emerges exactly at the point where inquiry begins to show how inequality endures without requiring individual malice. What is rejected in such moments is not a particular interpretation, but the ethical demand to recognize that present conditions are shaped by accumulated decisions whose effects do not expire with their authors.

The controversy surrounding Critical Race Theory must be understood within this broader refusal of historical attention. Like environmental analysis, it unsettles the comfort of abstraction by tracing how power operates across time as well as space. And like environmental critique, it is often attacked not for what it argues, but for what it renders visible: that injustice need not be actively willed in order to be actively maintained. Therefore, it is particularly Critical Race Theory that is subject to systematic distortion. In public discourse, it is routinely reduced to a moral doctrine that assigns guilt to individuals, fractures communities into fixed identities, and undermines social cohesion. Admittedly, this reduction is rhetorically efficient because it bypasses engagement with what Critical Race Theory actually is: a mode of legal and historical analysis concerned with institutional durability, path dependence, and the persistence of structural inequality beyond individual intent. Its object is not personal virtue or vice, but the historical sedimentation of law, policy, and practice.

Viewed through the lens of hospitality, resistance to such analysis reveals a deeper unease with historical attention itself. The fact that,

as scholars, we attend to the past does not mean that we remain imprisoned within it: as academics, we acknowledge that the present does not emerge *ex nihilo*. If we agree that responsibility precedes self-justification, then hospitality requires the willingness to hear narratives that do not flatter inherited self-images, to make room for accounts that complicate national myths without presuming their total collapse. This is not an act of accusation, but of listening. The refusal to listen, by contrast, often disguises itself as a defense of unity while quietly enforcing silence, and therefore, let me reiterate, *teaching history* is not *assigning guilt*; conversely, it aims at training perception as to what a democracy is willing to notice, and what the limits of the comfort zones of the privileged groups may be.

It is common knowledge that the histories of race, labor, and sovereignty in the Americas are inseparable from colonial expansion, forced migration, and uneven incorporation of spaces and communities into what we could dub “global modernity.” Consequently, it leaves no doubt that these histories do not “belong” to a single nation, nor can they be contained within a single moral narrative. Structurally committed to sustaining this difficult and often unsettling attention across borders and generations, universities, as the loci of hospitality, protect such inquiry *precisely* because its findings may resist reassurance, closure, or political convenience, whose consequences, across centuries, have proven tragic to countless human beings. While a hospitable society does not require *consensus* about the past, it does require the courage to encounter it. The ethical alternative to historical attention is not *innocence* but *amnesia*—and amnesia, however comforting, has never provided a stable foundation for justice or community. Studying history critically does not result in automatic assignment of moral roles a priori, its goal is to refuse the rhetorical erasure, dismissal, or marginalization of the importance of conditions that *continue to shape the present*. In this sense, Critical Race Theory does not undermine social life; its work is socially indispensable, as it participates in the demanding, yet necessary process of making social life *intelligible to itself*.

CHILDREN, EDUCATION, AND THE VIOLENCE OF MORAL SIMPLIFICATION

It would be hard to disagree that few figures in public debate are invoked with greater urgency—and fewer allowances for complexity—than the child. Appeals made in the name of protecting children routinely suspend deliberation, converting anxiety into certainty and disagreement into emergency. In contemporary controversies

over education, children are cast as *passive recipients of ideological harm*, imagined as fragile vessels endangered by exposure to difficult histories, contested identities, or moral ambiguity. This image carries enormous rhetorical force exactly because *it simplifies what it claims to defend*. It replaces the lived conditions of children's actual experience with an abstract figure of innocence that must be guarded at all costs.

What this moralization obscures is the distinction between symbolic protection and material care. Children do not encounter vulnerability first through ideas, but through hunger, illness, instability, and the absence of reliable support. Policies that withdraw healthcare access, dismantle school nutrition programs, or erode social safety nets do not merely fail children—they actively shape the conditions under which learning becomes precarious or impossible. To invoke children as grounds for moral panic while declining responsibility for their bodily well-being is *opposite to protection*; it is tantamount to *displacement*. Ethical concern is redirected from sustaining lives to policing narratives.

Again, the prism of hospitality exposes the cruelty of this displacement with particular clarity: philosophically speaking, to *welcome* a child into a *shared world* is not to preserve innocence indefinitely, but to assume responsibility for the welcomed child's *accompaniment*. If *relation precedes instruction*, then understanding does not arise by way of insulation, but in the course of sustained encounter grounded in trust. Moral development, like learning itself, requires exposure to difference within a framework of care. When education is reduced to the avoidance of discomfort, hospitality gives way to fear—and fear, once institutionalized, hardens into prohibition.

The consequences of this tendency towards moral simplification become even more tangible when one considers educational systems across the Americas, where social difference—racial, linguistic, cultural, economic—is either engaged or, to a greater or lesser extent, denied. Political efforts to administratively impose moral simplicity in classrooms frequently mirror broader political strategies that suppress historical complexity while leaving structural inequality untouched. Universities shape this terrain indirectly but decisively, through teacher education, developmental research, and pedagogical practice. Across these domains, the evidence is consistent: children do not learn by being shielded from complexity, but by encountering it with guidance, stability, and care.

A genuinely hospitable educational ethic therefore refuses false choices. It does not ask whether children should be *protected or educated*, but *how protection and education can be sustained together*.

It does not assign children fixed moral identities, nor does it demand premature judgment. Instead, it equips them with language, context, and imagination—capacities that allow them to encounter others as participants in a shared, if uneven, social life. The real violence does not lie in complexity, but in the demand for simplicity in contexts in which understanding unquestionably requires time and patience. To protect children ethically is not to seal them off from the world, but to remain answerable for the material and relational conditions under which they learn to inhabit it. And certainly, not to deny them lunches, medical care at school, or structural access to high quality educational formulas that would not deepen the abyss between privilege and precarity, but that would systematically narrow the gap in an upwards movement.

ORDINARY LIVES AND THE RHETORIC OF RESENTMENT

What connects the preceding debates over children, care, and moral simplification is a deeper struggle over who may speak for vulnerability, and to what end. Appeals to protection often slide imperceptibly into claims of representation, transforming those imagined as at risk into moral instruments rather than interlocutors, those “spoken for,” rather than those “speaking.” In this shift, complexity becomes “inconvenient,” and lived experience is stripped of its texture in order to serve a political narrative whose ends have already been decided in advance.

Invocations of “ordinary people” carry a powerful moral charge. They appeal to authenticity, lived experience, and the dignity of those who feel unseen by institutions that speak in unfamiliar idioms. Yet when “ordinary lives” are mobilized primarily as evidence against knowledge-producing institutions, they risk being reduced to rhetorical instruments rather than encountered as complex social realities. Suffering becomes “proof,” and “proof” becomes accusation. What is lost in this conversion is unequivocally what hospitality requires: sustained attention to the *irreducible* texture of another’s life, untranslatable into slogans or moral shortcuts. The authority to speak for “ordinary people” is thus quietly reserved for those least exposed to the conditions being invoked—those whose distance from precarity enables resentment to be curated rather than endured.

Hospitality, understood as an ethical practice, resists such appropriation. Tadeusz Ślawek’s reflections on *be-littlement*—his insistence on listening to the “friend across the pond,” whose voice reaches us faintly, belatedly, and without any guarantee of clarity—offer a necessary corrective. Against political rhetorics that reward volume,

speed, and certainty, Sławek recalls an ethics grounded in attentiveness to what cannot immediately assert itself.

The code of the “Moral Law” recognizes only concrete, already articulated human claims; it is governed not by an ethics that listens for what remains mute, but by a politics that listens to whoever has articulated their—often dubious—reasons most forcefully. (Sławek, *U-bywać* 457)

To listen hospitably, then, is to suspend the urge to translate another’s pain too quickly into political utility. It is to acknowledge that economic precarity, addiction, family disruption, and loss are not arguments to be won, but realities to be understood. Resentment thrives where listening is replaced by ventriloquism—where care is claimed on behalf of others without the patience of attention that their lives truly demand. This ethical demand acquires additional weight when considered from the perspective of political and military hegemony of the US. Across the Americas, narratives of “ordinary people” have often been mobilized to justify exclusion, silence, or the redirection of blame away from structural conditions, and even more often to render military control over resources both moral and legal. Universities, in this context, are “inconvenient”: examining these dynamics, they oppose their exploitation, developing intersubjectively verifiable insights through ethnography, public health research, labor studies, and community-engaged scholarship that, first and foremost, seek to render suffering legible without converting it into spectacle. The work of the academics does not romanticize hardship, nor does it presume to speak for those who endure it. It traces how policy, markets, healthcare systems, and historical inequities converge in individual lives or in the lives of communities. Understandably, partisan or individual interests drive politicians towards manipulative public dismissals of such inquiries as elitist, even if they do understand the ethical orientation of such studies. Such gestures, however, go counter hospitality, which refuses to align with anger, but translates into solidarity grounded in understanding, not in accusation. Hospitality rejects the comfort of resentment in favor of the much more demanding labor of care: listening long enough to recognize complexity, and resisting the temptation to reduce lives to symbols in someone else’s “moral” *theatrum*.

EXPERTISE, DEMOCRACY, AND THE HOSPITALITY OF COUNSEL

What resentment ultimately refuses is not knowledge as such, but the *discipline of being answered*. Attentive “listening to ordinary lives” (as opposed to invoking them rhetorically), involves the acceptance

of the fact that suffering is not resolvable with ready-made conclusions, nor with a single political demand attached. It calls for mediation, interpretation, and judgment sustained over time. It is this mediating labor that populist rhetoric seeks to bypass: instead of remaining answerable to the complexity of lived experience, it displaces frustration onto figures who appear to stand between grievance and resolution: teachers, researchers, physicians, economists—those whose task is not to validate anger, but to complicate it.

Once this displacement occurs, expertise itself becomes suspect. Knowledge that refuses to confirm preexisting convictions, or to serve the political or economic goals of a dominant group, is publicly reimaged as alien, elitist, or coercive. The expert is no longer understood as one who contributes to a shared world of understanding, but as one who withholds access to it; no longer a participant in democratic deliberation, but an obstacle to it. In this shift, a crucial ethical and political distinction collapses—one that Hannah Arendt carefully preserved: the difference between authority that commands obedience and authority that invites judgment. When counsel is misrecognized as domination, the very conditions for responsible collective judgment are undermined. The attack on expertise, therefore, does not restore democratic agency; it erodes the practices through which judgment can be formed without coercion.

Democratic societies live within a productive tension between popular judgment and specialized knowledge. When this tension is sustained with care, expertise serves democracy not by ruling in its place, but by informing deliberation within it—what Arendt would point out as the fragile space where judgment is exercised rather than enforced. When mishandled, however, expertise is recast as domination, and counsel is mistaken for command. In such moments, the figure of the expert becomes a convenient antagonist: unelected, brandishing a diploma, yet insulated, and allegedly unaccountable. What disappears is the very distinction that makes non-sovereign authority possible—the distinction between governing and advising, between ruling and helping others to see.

The philosophies of hospitality, again, offer useful vocabulary in this context. A scholar offering counsel *extends an invitation* rather than *issues an order*. The counsel presupposes the freedom of the one addressed to accept, reject, or revise what is offered. Kant's refusal of paternalism remains decisive: Enlightenment does not consist in being protected from judgment, but in being treated as capable of exercising it. Expertise that demands obedience betrays this principle, as does the expertise that retreats in fear of rejection. The hospitable

posture lies between these extremes, in the willingness to speak responsibly without claiming sovereignty over the listener.

Knowledge circulates across cultures without arriving as a neutral package; translanguistically, transculturally, it must be translated, contested, and adapted before it becomes integrated, thus changing the overall shape of the acceptor system of knowledge. It leaves little doubt that one of the central tenets of the mission of the university is to serve as a mediating space within these circulations, by way of training individuals not only to *acquire* knowledge, but also to subject it to critique, peer review, and public scrutiny. Public attempts to delegitimize such spaces certainly do not serve the goal of strengthening democracy; each such rhetorical gesture causes the impoverishment of the shared conditions under which judgment becomes possible.

If a hospitable democracy does not necessarily require deference to expertise, it indubitably does require openness *to being addressed* by those who *know differently*. Refusing counsel in advance—on the grounds that it might complicate preference or unsettle certainty—is not equal to the assertion of freedom. Rather, it is an act of withdrawal from the shared labor of judgment upon which democratic life depends. Universities, at their best, do not *replace* democratic decision-making. They prepare citizens to participate in it without demanding that complexity be simplified into loyalty.

DIGITAL SPACES AND THE NEW FRONTIERS OF HOSPITALITY

Since the onset of the Digital Age, the conditions under which counsel is offered and received have changed profoundly. The erosion of trust in expertise no longer unfolds only in legislatures, classrooms, or public forums; it is increasingly mediated by technological environments that shape the formation of judgment itself. Democratic deliberation now takes place within infrastructures that privilege speed over reflection, visibility over responsibility, and reaction over relation. In such spaces, the ethical distinction between *advising* and *commanding* becomes harder to sustain—not because it has lost its normative force, but because the temporal and affective conditions that once supported it have been systematically reengineered. The question of hospitality, which has thus far concerned the issues of “who may speak,” “who is heard,” and “under what ethical constraints,” must therefore be extended to the, oftentimes rhizomatic, digital architectures through which contemporary knowledge now circulates.

The digital transformation of knowledge has altered not only the modes in which ideas circulate, but also ways in which hospital-

ity itself is practiced (or refused). Universities no longer host inquiry exclusively within classrooms, libraries, or campuses; they now operate across platforms that promise openness while accelerating exposure. Digital environments eliminate physical distance and amplify visibility, but they also reward immediacy and, frequently, intensify the potentiality for the misrecognition of subjects, objects, contexts, and messages alike. Especially in social media, context thins, disagreement hardens, and provisional claims (sometimes formulated as simplistic memes) rapidly transmogrify as final positions. Under these conditions, the ethical labor of hospitality becomes both more urgent and more difficult to sustain: welcoming another into discourse increasingly means exposing them to the anonymity of participants, no longer accountable for hostile acts or manipulation, misinformation, unverified claims, rhetorical attacks, or blatant verbal abuse. Of course, as we have already determined, welcoming another is never a neutral gesture; it always involves risk. As Jacques Derrida reminds us, hospitality carries within it the possibility of betrayal—of the guest becoming vulnerable to forces the host cannot fully control. In digital spaces, this risk is amplified by the obscured asymmetry between host and guest. Platforms present themselves as neutral conduits, while tacitly shaping attention, sometimes provoking outrage, and, of course, conditioning exclusion through algorithmic design. This is why universities participate in this ecology only ambivalently; they do depend on (both closed and open) digital infrastructures to build efficient networks of collaboration, to disseminate research results, and to offer teaching, yet, at the same time, they also confront the effects of the erosion of face-to-face relations, the reduction of deliberative time, and the dangers of the conversion of inquiry into performance.

Digital knowledge flows, depending on access and algorithmic control, reproduce familiar inequalities even as they promise democratization. Optimistic accounts of digital circulation—such as those analyzed by Piotr Gorliński-Kucik in his discussion of anarcho-transhumanist imaginaries—foreground the Internet's potential to support federated knowledge exchange, minority association, and open access to information. As Gorliński-Kucik notes, such visions often presuppose an educated society capable of making reflective use of these tools, and they assign a significant role to academia in cultivating this capacity. Yet his analysis is diagnostic rather than celebratory: it underscores how easily emancipatory aspirations are entangled with technological systems that remain structurally uneven and politically ambivalent (Gorliński-Kucik 97).

Access to platforms, linguistic dominance, algorithmic visibility, and infrastructural power remain radically uneven across regions and cultures. Digital openness does not abolish asymmetry; it often redistributes it in less visible forms. A hospitable digital university must therefore cultivate new forms of care: critical digital literacy, open access to research results, ethics of digital contact, or resistance to the tempting automation of AI supported research in the name of acceleration, demanded by the bodies evaluating research productivity on regular basis. Importantly, hospitality in digital knowledge environments does not mean unconditional welcome to unrestricted exposure. Rather, it takes the form of sustained attentiveness to how ideas travel, mutate, and how they are, or potentially may be, weaponized. The real danger is not that universities “control” digital truth, but that they struggle—often imperfectly—to preserve ethical relations in spaces structurally designed to reward speed, and thereby quietly inviting oversimplification, haste of judgment, and selective consumption of information, of which some pieces, not mediated by the “You” of a professional teacher, quite skillfully masquerading as academic studies, are manufactured “fake facts.”

CONCLUSION: THE PROFESSOR AS FRIEND, OR AUTHORITY WITHOUT SOVEREIGNTY

As this long essay demonstrates, in discussions concerning authority, friendship is an uneasy category. It appears to suggest intimacy where distance is expected, or sympathy where judgment is required. Yet this unease is exactly what makes friendship philosophically productive. From Aristotle onward, *philia* has named a relation that neither deconstructs difference nor abolishes asymmetry. Friendship is not sustained by sameness, but by a shared orientation toward common good—an orientation that presupposes disagreement, patience, and time. Understood in this way, friendship does not negate authority; it refines it ethically.

Our discussion of academic hospitality was designed to shed ample light on how such authority operates. The host does not dominate the guest, nor does the guest absolve the host of responsibility. Authority, in such a context, is exercised through care for the conditions of encounter: attentiveness, restraint, and the willingness to remain present even when agreement fails. Martin Buber’s powerful vocabulary supports this posture: a professor who addresses students as *interlocutors* rather than *objects of instruction* enacts an authority that is neither coercive nor sentimental. It is grounded in trust, sustained by credibility, and permanently exposed to challenge.

Furthermore, particularly in traditions that understand teaching as vocation rather than domination, authority is not understood as *sovereignty* but as *service*—it is oriented toward the flourishing of others rather than the selfish consolidation of power. To describe the professor as a friend is not to deny hierarchy or expertise; it is to insist that expertise remain answerable and hierarchy remain porous. Such friendship does not flatter, indoctrinate, or demand allegiance. It invites students into the difficult labor of thinking together, accepting that friendship, like learning itself, is sustained not by certainty, but by fidelity to a shared pursuit of understanding.

Perceived in the hemispheric and transoceanic perspectives, this model of authority acquires additional dimensions. Universities operate across cultural, linguistic, and historical differences that are not (and cannot be) governed by uniform doctrine. Friendship offers a way of inhabiting these differences without erasing them—of sustaining relation without demanding assimilation. In a political climate increasingly tempted to recast authority as enmity, the figure of the professor-as-friend stands as a quiet alternative: an authority that does not teach by command, but by means of remaining in conversation long enough for understanding to emerge.

This dialogical authority does not end at the classroom door. The figure of the professor-as-friend presupposes an institutional ecology capable of sustaining such relations over time. A thus conceived friendship requires circulation of voices, texts, methods, and perspectives that no single tradition can generate on its own. Once authority is understood as *relational* rather than *sovereign*, the university itself can no longer be imagined as a closed or self-sufficient space. It appears instead as an infrastructure of encounter—one whose ethical task is not to police origins of thought or enforce uniformity, but to host movement without foreclosing judgment.

Universities are therefore often falsely, and misleadingly, projected as enclosed territories—bounded by campus gates, national traditions, or ideological loyalties. Yet, demonstrably, historically and structurally, the university functions less as a fortress than as a port: a site of arrival and departure where people, texts, methods, and questions circulate across physical and metaphorical borders. Ideas enter bearing the marks of the other—other languages, other histories, other urgencies—and they circulate further, transformed in the course of the encounter. Therefore, to demand that such an institution must speak with a single “national” voice, especially in a traditionally multiethnic, multilingual, and multiracial country, is to gravely misunderstand its *raison d’être*. In the framework of Hemispheric and Transoceanic

American Studies, thus insight is not an afterthought within the field, but a foundational methodological assumption. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin argued in her presidential address to the American Studies Association, American culture has always been constituted through “crossroads of cultures,” shaped by multilingual, transnational, and diasporic exchanges that cannot be reduced to a single national narrative (Fishkin 20). American culture, as has been asserted in several contexts above, has never been self-contained; it has been constituted through contact zones, and continues to be shaped by migration, trade, the discourse of the empire, resistance, and translation. Atlantic and Pacific worlds, Indigenous hemispheric networks, and contemporary global circuits have all left their imprint on what counts as “American” knowledge. Therefore, unavoidably, universities function as ports within these circulations: like seaports, they do not aim to harmonize difference into consensus, but to foster progress by allowing divergent trajectories to meet without a priori foreclosure. And beyond doubt, however inconvenient this observation may be to the hegemonies of political discourse, the task of the academia is not to certify loyalty, but to sustain intelligibility across distance.

Philosophies of hospitality remind us that such openness is never neutral. To host is to risk disruption—to accept that what arrives may unsettle inherited arrangements. Kant’s notion of world citizenship does not abolish borders, but it insists that the right to appear before others without hostility is a minimal ethical condition of shared life on the earth’s surface. In a world marked by displacement, migration, and uneven mobility, this insistence becomes all the more urgent. Universities, transnational in practice if not always in rhetoric, enact this principle daily—often awkwardly, often imperfectly, but persistently.

The anxiety provoked by the role of university as a port is understandable. Throughout history of human movement, ports have unsettled fantasies of “purity” and “control”; they always expose societies to what they may not always be able to fully manage. Yet a university sealed against circulation would cease to function as a university at all, because knowledge stagnates where movement is blocked. A hospitable university does not ask whether “ideas are loyal” before admitting them; it asks whether they can be engaged responsibly once they arrive. Hospitality, in this sense, is not generosity. It is the condition of intellectual survival in a world where long-term isolation is neither possible nor desirable.

It is this refusal of isolation that makes universities recurring targets of political suspicion. Where knowledge circulates, loyalties appear diluted; where encounter persists, enemies are harder to name.

In such climates, the language of hospitality is easily recoded as weakness, betrayal, or naïveté. Yet this hostility does not arise *despite* the university's transnational character—it arises *because* of it. What is feared is not error, but relation itself: the possibility that sustained exposure to others might interrupt the fantasy of moral or national self-sufficiency, or that it could expose the selfish intentions of those seeking ultimate control, power, which renders authority impossible.

Hospitality, like peace, is never guaranteed. It must be practiced repeatedly, often under conditions that reward its opposite. In moments of social strain, the temptation to name enemies rather than interlocutors grows strong, offering the comfort of clarity at the expense of understanding. This essay, debarring and dismantling the fundaments of this temptation, approaches hospitality *not as sentiment*, but *as discipline*: a commitment to remain open to what arrives, even when it unsettles inherited certainties and complicates comfortable alignments encroaching upon comfort zones of those who would defend the less and less sustainable status quo.

Hospitality can exclude as well as welcome; it can mask power even as it offers care. To study hospitality critically is therefore not to celebrate it unconditionally, but to examine the conditions under which it becomes possible, meaningful, or distorted. Universities, like societies, are not judged by the *absence of conflict*, but by how they sustain spaces in which *conflict does not harden into enmity*. The recurrence of this hostility is not accidental. When Richard Nixon described universities as enemies, he did so in the name of order threatened by critique. When J.D. Vance repeats this charge decades later, he does so in the language of betrayal, capture, and moral emergency. Despite their differences in context and style, both rely on the same conceptual mistake: the belief that authority must eliminate uncertainty, that disagreement signals disloyalty, and that institutions devoted to judgment are dangerous *precisely because they cannot be fully controlled*. What is then named as *corruption* is in fact *the refusal of sovereignty*; what is denounced as *indoctrination* is *the persistence of unbiased inquiry*. Under these terms, the error is not strategic but philosophical—and it is this error that the essay has sought to make visible. And, notably, if this error is committed on purpose, if the proponents of this rhetoric are aware of all of the ramifications of their claims—conclusions concerning the morality of speakers relying on “ordinary people’s” inability to decipher their manipulations masked as care impose themselves automatically.

The professor is your friend, because knowledge is, and has always been, a shared undertaking—it is politicians who would transform

it into a battlefield to their own, unethical, goals. Properly cultivated, academic friendship, rooted in hospitality, names a fragile relation—one sustained only through patience, accountability, and the willingness to listen across difference. Where “authority” is reduced to “command” and “disagreement” is marketed as “enmity,” friendship is mockingly dismissed as naïveté, and dialogue ultimately freezes into a manipulative monologue of partisan indoctrination. Our well-being in the shared world vitally relies upon our ability to reject all forms of politics fostering enmity, and to openly recognize that education—if it is to matter at all—must begin with hospitality based on a welcome extended to “a friend across the pond.”

Abstract: This essay responds to contemporary political rhetoric proposed by J.D. Vance, who follows Richard Nixon in recasting universities as hostile institutions and intellectuals as enemies of democratic life in his keynote speech delivered before the audiences of the Second National Conservatism Conference in November 2021. Rather than defending higher education as an idealized or flawless system, the essay proposes a different ethical framework: hospitality understood as an institutional, epistemic, and civic practice. Drawing on philosophical traditions of hospitality and friendship—from Kant’s cosmopolitan right and Lévinas’s ethics of responsibility to Derrida’s reflections on conditional and unconditional welcome, as well as dialogical accounts of relational authority—the text reframes the university as a space of encounter rather than control. Situated within hemispheric and transoceanic American Studies, the essay emphasizes that American knowledge has never been self-contained, but has emerged through circulation, translation, and conflict across borders. Universities are approached as fragile architectures of exposure: institutions that do not manufacture consensus or loyalty, but sustain the conditions under which disagreement can occur without collapsing into enmity. Addressing debates over expertise, education, history, labor, environment, and digital knowledge, the text resists the conversion of critique into “siege rhetoric.” By proposing the figure of *the professor as friend* and *the university as host*, this essay invites readers to reconsider intellectual life as a shared undertaking grounded in responsibility, listening, and ethical risk. Hospitality, it argues, is not sentiment but discipline—and a necessary condition for democratic and transnational inquiry in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: hospitality, university, friendship, American Studies, transnational knowledge, expertise and democracy

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HOSPITALITY, OR WHY WE STILL NEED UTOPIAS

An Introduction

While we may intuitively grasp the idea of hospitality within social, political, and moral contexts, our understandings of who qualifies as a guest—and who does not—as well as of enmity and friendship, are far from universally shared. Hospitality resists easy definition; yet its semantic indeterminacy need not result in intellectual helplessness. On the contrary, the difficulty of defining it points to a more fundamental issue: its inherently utopian character. Like all utopias, hospitality names an ideal toward which we feel compelled to strive, even as it proves difficult—perhaps impossible—to realize in its original form. In this introduction, we briefly outline a series of paradoxes, contradictions, and even aporias that emerge when a stranger appears at our door.

The art of hospitality—because it is indeed an art—is marked by an inherent duality. We wish to be hospitable because it feels like the “right” thing to do; yet we also expect the guest to abide by the rules that govern our space. A boundary persists insofar as we do not consent to the violation of our integrity. This is a decisive moment: the point at which we must ask whether opening ourselves to the Other truly entails a willingness to bear certain costs. And this is a question each of us must answer individually. It is easy to welcome someone we have invited; confronting an unannounced stranger, however, introduces fear and uncertainty. Hospitality, understood as an art, thus becomes a conscious engagement with difficulty. It is, fundamentally, a risk.

The risk of hospitality should be taken seriously as a distinct philosophical category. In *In Praise of Risk* (2011), Anne Dufourmantelle (whose dialogue with Jacques Derrida on the subject of hospitality is one of the most penetrating inquiries into this concept) argues

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that this risk is not calculated deliberation or prudence, but is a *kairos*, that is, a “decisive instant” which “opens an unknown space” and thereby inaugurates “another time” (2). The relationship between risk understood in this way and the internal structure of hospitality is, for her, fundamental: “Our birth constitutes the first act of hospitality, not psychological, but ontological: we come from an other, we are carried, carried in our very constitution by a mother” (165). To offer hospitality to a stranger means nothing more and nothing less than to repeat and affirm the very structure of our existence. This is what makes the utopian demand of unconditional hospitality so tenacious: it is not about a moral ideal imposed from outside, but about some irreducible dimension of who we are.

In Western culture, we can identify several thinkers who have engaged with hospitality philosophically. Looking back to ancient tradition, we find the concept understood as a form of civic regulation in Plato’s *Laws* (V [729e–730a], VIII [842b]). In creating the ideal state of Magnesia, Plato introduces strict laws of hospitality, with Zeus Xenios as their divine sanction. Citizens are obliged to protect and welcome newcomers. Hospitality also surfaces frequently as a motif in classical literature, such as Homer’s *Odyssey* or Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (e.g., the myth of Philemon and Baucis). Many centuries later, the philosopher who spent most of his life in one place, Immanuel Kant, wrote in his 1795 essay *Perpetual Peace* that “The rights of men, as citizens of the world, shall be limited to the conditions of universal hospitality” (137). His assertion is meant to serve as a foundation for a world legal order, rather than a comprehensive ethics of welcome. In the twentieth century, philosophical discussions of hospitality as a moral imperative were developed by Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, both of Jewish origin and writing after the Holocaust. Both are known for their resolute rejection of dogmatic thinking and for resisting the confinement of language to unambiguity. All the more significant, then, is their emphasis on the unconditional nature of openness to, and acceptance of, the Other. In the Preface to his magisterial *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas proposes to think of human “subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality” (27). It is, indeed, one of the most powerful ethical statements ever made. I exist as a human being only insofar as I open myself to the Other, claims the French-Jewish philosopher. Or, to put it another way, it is my hospitality and generosity toward the Other that make me human. In both perspectives, it is the Other who surpasses me; the Other who is my superior. Is this utopian thinking? Of course it is. And Levinas himself would not see such a judgment as disqualifying criticism.

Among contemporary theoretical discussions of hospitality, special attention should be given to *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action* (2011) by Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick, who argue that “a new hermeneutics of hospitality is needed in our age of mounting hostility” (3). In the North American context, Lindsay Anne Balfour examines what it means to be a native in the United States in *Hospitality in a Time of Terror: Strangers at the Gate* (2018). The rather bleak picture of the Western world that emerges from both books only underscores how little the Greek and Judeo-Christian heritage has succeeded in instilling, within our collective mentality, an understanding of opening one’s door to a stranger as a gesture fundamental to being human. The art of hospitality is not highly valued today. We need masters. We need apprentices of this art. We need a new language—and the ability to translate it into action.

When writing about hospitality in the political sense today—that is, in 2026—we cannot overlook three concurrent processes that are inextricably linked to it. We are witnessing large-scale migration, a trend that continues to intensify. At the same time, in the Western world—though not exclusively there—there is a renewed interest in locality and so-called “little homelands,” accompanied by nationalist movements gaining significant support. These phenomena are mutually influential. Ultimately, however, in the “Age of Migration,” as Michel Agier calls it (58), people are divided into those who migrate and those who grant—or refuse—asylum. The question of asylum has two dimensions: on the one hand, it depends on authorities that provide administrative and logistical frameworks; on the other, it rests on the willingness of local communities—ordinary people who offer hospitality in the course of everyday life. Without this local dimension, hospitality does not exist. It cannot be imposed, much less grafted into anyone’s mind, by institutions alone.

This tension between institutional politics and the lived experience of coexistence is discussed by Zygmunt Bauman in *Strangers at Our Door* (2016). Written as a direct response to the migration crisis in Europe, this book points to two opposing impulses that characterize the attitudes of city dwellers toward migrants: “mixophilia,” that is, a fascination with otherness and a desire for encounter, and “mixophobia,” which is the fear of what cannot be controlled, what is different and unknown (9). The latter impulse is notoriously played out and reinforced by the media and politicians, ultimately creating what Bauman calls a “moral panic”: a collective anxiety that provides a pretext for manifesting hostility toward newcomers (2). The only remedy for such a state that Bauman proposes is solidarity: “there is no exit from that crisis other than solidarity of humans” (19).

Without solidarity, there is no counterbalance to mixophobia—only a “culture of comfort” remains, which makes societies insensitive to the fate of those who knock at the doors of their homes (21).

Rafał Włodarczyk, a Polish scholar of hospitality, rightly points out that, in the context of granting asylum, we cannot ignore its consequences and effects (2). Accordingly, we may distinguish three models: (1) assimilation, or the disappearance of the otherness of the Other; (2) the melting pot, a situation in which the arrival of others affects and transforms, to varying degrees, both host communities and other migrant groups in a given area; and (3) cultural pluralism, understood as the peaceful and harmonious coexistence of host and migrant groups. Significantly, none of these models suggests a stable, long-term condition. The defining features of hospitality—its resistance to clear definition, its incompleteness, its perpetual unfulfillment, its instability—thus lead us to recognize it as a fundamentally utopian concept.

Kearney and Fitzpatrick approach hospitality within a broad conceptual framework, making their remarkable book not only an academic monograph but also a narrative exploring ways of understanding the human condition in the contemporary world. Here, theory takes the form of anthropological reflection: “Hospitality is built into the very fabric of who we are. Beginning with birth, we are hosted, nurtured, cared for, guested” (10). Let us now consider several ways proposed by Kearney and Fitzpatrick for understanding how we might welcome the Other. The examples discussed below are relatively underexplored, especially in comparison with the more obvious political contexts (migration, exile). This shift in perspective is particularly useful, as many of these approaches are further developed in the articles featured in this thematic issue of *RIAS*.

To begin with, there is *linguistic hospitality*, which manifests itself as translation—as a form of mediation between the host language (for example, the reader) and the guest/outsider language (for example, the author of the text) (Kearney and Fitzpatrick 17). This understanding of hospitality was proposed by Paul Ricoeur at the beginning of the twenty-first century in his essay *On Translation*. The act of translation is a moment of compromise or betrayal—we adapt the foreign text according to the rules of the given language, often teetering on the edge of betraying the foreign idiom of the author’s language (Ricoeur 23–24). Whose right, whose language matters more? Are we really dealing with a situation in which one side must be more important? George Steiner offers a more radical view of translation. For him, everyone has their own individual language, their own distinct idiom of thinking: “translation is formally and pragmatically implicit

in every act of communication [...]. To understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate" (XII, emphasis in the original).

Linguistic hospitality affects the lives of authors who arrive in a new language, which becomes their means of expression and a new form of self-identification. In American literature, there are numerous examples to illustrate this. Let us mention one narrative that, notably, represents a Jewish-American experience—the readiness to inhabit a foreign language, to embrace the world of hosts within one's mother tongue, and, simultaneously, to cope with the tension between the two without resolving it into either assimilation or untranslatability. Published in 1934, the novel *Call It Sleep* by Henry Roth documents the lives of Jewish immigrants in New York and their simultaneous existence in two linguistic spheres. Roth explores this "schizophrenia" through stylistic, rhetorical, and spelling choices. The Yiddish spoken by the protagonist at home is rendered in a hieratic, nearly biblical English. Street language is captured as phonetically mangled and orthographically distorted: for example, "I godduh waid hea till duh wissle blows" (22). The phonetic rendering of street English—Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrant accents colliding in the Lower East Side—shows a genuine sociolinguistic environment. The garbled orthography slows our reading, mirroring the protagonist's overwhelmed perception. English is something to be endured and deciphered, not inhabited.

Secondly, there is *narrative hospitality*, which refers to the host's openness to the story and narrative of the newcomer, who may turn out to be either a friend or an enemy. Here again, we draw inspiration from Ricœur, who notes: "It is necessary for us to have gone through the ethical requirements of translation—what I call linguistic hospitality—and through the requirements of the exchange of memories—narrative hospitality" ("Reflections" 8). It may happen that the victor's narrative collides with the defeated's. In such a case, we must remember that both are references to a shared experience. Hospitality then amounts to embarking together on a journey toward truth, which, in turn, carries "a hermeneutic risk" (Kearney and Fitzpatrick 25). The interpretation of history is a constant discussion revolving around wrongs, guilt, and punishment. It also entails awareness that the ability to introduce one's narrative into wider circulation stems from power. Let us illustrate this with three examples from American literature written using the erasure technique.

The political aspect of literary erasure is not solely attributable to the subject matter selected by the author (the eraser), which more often than not pertains to politics or, more broadly, history. It also results from formal solutions at the level of text construction. Analyzing

contemporary definitions of literary erasure reveals a dominance of connotation in the choice of key terms, synonyms, associations, and metaphors. Primarily, and for clear reasons, erasure is regarded as an act of destroying or violating the original text. Kate Millar, for example, references concepts such as “awakened ruins” and “disappear,” the second of which, as a verb, signifies not only the act of rendering something nonexistent but also implies abduction and killing or imprisonment, and the withholding of information about the individual’s fate (“Mary Rueffle”). For poet Jennifer S. Cheng, during the process of erasure, “the old paths of meaning must be destabilized” (“Refraction”).

Zong! (2008) by Canadian poet and prose writer M. NourbeSe Philip is a long poem recounting the 1781 massacre of approximately 130 African slaves thrown overboard by their owners in order to claim insurance. The text draws on documentation from the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case, but Philip conceals most of the testimony in order to evoke the victims’ hidden, previously unexpressed cries. Tracy K. Smith’s short erasure “Declaration” (2017) removes a large portion of the foundational document of the United States, exposing the hypocrisy of its authors, who, while proclaiming the importance of freedom, participated in the consolidation of slavery. In *Whereas* (2017), Oglala Lakota poet Layli Long Soldier dismantles the governmental language of the “Apology to the Native Peoples of the United States,” signed in 2009, revealing the document’s lack of accountability. In these three texts, composed by non-white women, we encounter the clash of narratives of which Ricoeur speaks. The hermeneutic undertaking consists in delving into the text of power and showing how, from the very beginning, it was imbued with a counter-narrative. Hospitality, if it can be spoken of at all in this context, is less a condition than a postulate. It is a sober recognition—or rather acknowledgment—that the narrative of the outsider developed from the very outset within the framework of the dominant narrative. Hospitality thus becomes the imperative to apprehend the duality of the text, and thereby the truth of experience. It simply needed to be brought to light.

The third dimension of hospitality discussed by Kearney and Fitzpatrick is carnal contact (49). The most recognizable, most immediate, and perhaps most common gesture of welcome is the handshake. In a face-to-face encounter, we become acutely aware of how our bodies are, in essence, defenseless when exposed to the presence of the Other. The importance of this dimension of hospitality cannot be overstated. “We need [both] linguistic and carnal hosting,” write Kearney and Fitzpatrick, “for wounds to be healed and peace

to take place” (57, emphasis in the original). To stand face to face with a stranger—to smell, to touch—is to recognize that another’s presence is not a fiction, not an abstraction; it cannot be dismissed, as in video communication, by simply swiping a finger across a screen.

The radical physicality of hospitality finds a striking literary articulation in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, in a chapter titled “The Spouter-Inn.” While waiting for passage to Nantucket, the narrator, who asks the reader to call him Ishmael, spends the night in New Bedford. The innkeeper informs him that no beds are available. There is, however, a solution: to share a bed with one of the guests—a harpooner. Ishmael is not thrilled by this prospect, but given the circumstances, he agrees, with two provisos:

I told him that I never liked to sleep two in a bed; that if I should ever do so, it would depend upon who the harpooner might be, and that if he (the landlord) really had no other place for me, and the harpooneer was decidedly not objectionable, why rather than wander further about a strange town on so bitter a night, I would put up with the half of any decent man’s blanket. (28)

Knowing the realities of New England in the mid-nineteenth century, we recognize that sharing a bed in inns and taverns—even among several people—was nothing unusual at the time, especially for travelers and sailors. Ishmael agrees, while prudently setting conditions: the roommate must be “decent” and “decidedly not objectionable.” Melville’s narrative handling of hospitality is particularly revealing. As it happens, when the door is opened, the room turns out to be empty; the roommate is absent. Ishmael lies down and waits. He is not the host of this space, yet he will be the one to receive another. This act of reception unfolds in several phases.

“I am no coward,” reveals Ishmael, “but what to make of this head-peddling purple rascal altogether passed my comprehension” (34). The guest begins “the business of undressing,” and then, half-naked, performs a ritual of homage to an idol, singing “some pagan psalmody” (34–35). The exposure of his body to another’s gaze, although unconscious, intensifies the sense of otherness. Ishmael is “nonplussed and confounded” (35). The realization of another’s presence in the bed occurs only after the candles are extinguished, in darkness. Physical proximity and touch now become decisive. “[...] this wild cannibal, tomahawk between his teeth, sprang into bed with me. I sang out, I could not help it now; and giving a sudden grunt of astonishment he began feeling me” (35). Touch replaces sight; physicality becomes a mode of perception. In both cases, the body becomes a “dialogic” body (Przymuszała 19).

Dufourmantelle's insight that hospitality is "all about the threshold," meaning that it draws a line between the inside and the outside and invites reflection on what occurs at this boundary, finds a precise illustration in this scene: two bodies that, at a certain moment, register the presence of the other—a presence that cannot be denied (*In Praise* 165), a presence that one must take the risk of encountering. The fleeting violence of both men's reactions quickly dissipates. Melville, we may suggest, emphasizes touch as a decisive turning point toward the other human being. This is clearly demonstrated in the opening lines of the following chapter: "Upon waking next morning about daylight, I found Queequeg's arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife" (36).

The fourth dimension of hospitality concerns, as Kearney and Fitzpatrick put it, *a new frontier: the nonhuman Other* (108). We live in an era of ecological crisis—species extinction, global warming, pollution, and the disintegration of natural ecosystems. In this context, the concept of hospitality has become a paradigm for ecocritical thinking, grounded in a biocentric model that rejects Enlightenment anthropocentrism. The distinction between guest and host is thereby destabilized, constantly shifting. Is the world foreign to us, or are we the strangers to the world? Who is opening their doors to whom? Moreover, the crisis is, in fact, twofold: in this paradoxical moment of declining trust in science, the very existence of the ecological crisis is being questioned with increasing fervor.

Eco-hospitality has its dimensions and scales. In the poem "A New Year Greeting," the aging W. H. Auden writes:

On this day tradition allots
to taking stock of our lives,
my greetings to all of you, Yeasts,
Bacteria, Viruses,
Aerobics and Anaerobics:
A Very Happy New Year
to all for whom my ectoderm
is as Middle-Earth to me.

For creatures your size I offer
a free choice of habitat,
so settle yourselves in the zone
that suits you best, in the pools
of my pores or the tropical
forests of arm-pit and crotch,
in the deserts of my fore-arms,
or the cool woods of my scalp. (838)

The lines paint a picture of the human body as a space inhabited by microorganisms—yeasts, bacteria, and other organisms—that form a complex ecosystem. The inspiration for the poem came from an article by Mary J. Marples published in the January 1969 issue of *Scientific American*, in which the microbiologist describes human skin as having “ecological niches: the desert of the forearm, the cool words of the scalp,” etc. (108). In Auden’s text, the idea assumes a form of “offering” one’s skin as a space, as a zone for beings commonly regarded as lower than humans on the evolutionary ladder. They are absolutely essential to our existence, both those on our skin and those inside us. It is estimated that over 50% of the human body is not human (Gallagher). The greeting expressed by the speaker in this poem is an example of hospitality *à rebours*, because in reality, we have no choice—we must accept these strangers in order to exist. It is worth adding that Auden dedicated this poem to Vassily Yanovsky, a writer and physician who fled Soviet Russia during the first wave of emigration in the 1920s, first to France and then to the USA, where he was welcomed and, from 1942 onwards, lived permanently.

What connects the above-mentioned examples is not so much a common theme as precisely the same gesture. Literature achieves something that philosophical argument cannot: it enacts hospitality rather than defining it. Ishmael is initially apprehensive about the body of the Other, but in the end simply shares a bed with him. Philip, Smith, and Long Soldier do not call for the inclusion and recognition of suppressed narratives; they perform the act of inclusion, in a material sense, within the space of another narrative. Auden does not elaborate on the concept of eco-hospitality; he simply welcomes. This enactment—that is, the readiness to situate oneself in a position of openness, to let the Other in without imposing preconditions or controlling the encounter—is, we would argue, the literary mode of hospitality *par excellence*. Perhaps this is the most appropriate way of approaching the matter: for hospitality, as it emerges from these texts, is not a proposition to be considered but a threshold to be crossed.

Returning to the utopian quality of hospitality that Włodarczyk writes about, let us recall an important statement by the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski: “All utopias are self-contradictory” (131). From this perspective, hospitality appears as an ideal state that is, however, impossible to achieve. It is unattainable both as “a way of thinking,” “a mentality,” “a philosophical attitude,” or, we may add, as a form of behavior (131). We may strive toward its fulfillment, but this effort can never fully succeed. At most, we can speak of an asymptotic movement. For Kołakowski, utopia is not merely

a project—let us say, a sociopolitical one—aimed at improving life or some aspect of it. Rather, it expresses a human faith that “a definite and unsurpassable condition is attainable, one where there is nothing to correct any more” (132). History and reason would suggest that we think rationally and realistically in this regard, without illusions. Yet it seems unlikely that the utopia of hospitality will disappear from our dreams—and even if it did, it would bring us no good.

We cannot view what Kant, Levinas, and Dufourmontelle tell us about welcoming the Other solely in terms of wishful thinking. Hospitality, as an imperative, only makes sense in the context of individual transformation. On a macro scale, it is impossible to implement. Discussing the development of the idea of perfect brotherhood over the centuries and the disappointment that efforts to achieve it have brought, Kołakowski observes: “This is the common and permanent core of utopian thinking, and it has been criticised on various grounds ... any attempt to implement it is bound to produce a highly despotic society which, to simulate the impossible perfection, will stifle the expression of conflict and thus destroy the life and culture by a totalitarian coercion” (138). And yet he does not end here. Instead of condemning, he transforms the function of utopian thinking. The anti-utopian stance, he warns, can itself become a tool for sanctioning oppression: “it is too easy to use all the well-founded antiutopian arguments as a device whereby we may accept or even sanctify any kind of oppression and blatant injustice” (143). The conclusion he reaches is therefore dialectical in nature: “the idea of human fraternity is a disastrous as a political program but is indispensable as a guiding sign. We need it, to use the same Kantian idiom again, as a regulative, rather than constitutive, idea” (144). A regulative idea, in the Kantian sense, cannot be realized but must always be kept in mind—not as a blueprint but as a direction. Kołakowski is not so much a skeptic as one who points to a certain necessary tension: “Ultimately we have to live between two irreconcilable claims, each of them having its cultural justification” (145). It is precisely within this tension that the utopia of hospitality resides.

The tension between the danger of utopia and its necessity finds a powerful expression in *Of Hospitality*, a now-classic book co-authored by Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, to which we have already alluded. Performing what it theorizes, it consists of two voices: Dufourmantelle wrote the “Invitation”—a poetic-philosophical commentary in the left margin of each page—while Derrida provided his “responses,” drawn from the transcription of two seminars he led in Paris in January 1996, which occupy the right margin. The very

form of this publication is an act of hospitality: she invites, he responds, and neither voice subsumes the other. Reflecting on the question that the stranger poses to us, Dufourmantelle suggests that it should be understood as a “utopia,” but in the Greek sense of the word, as *topos*, a place. Utopia is “out of place,” and it is from this placelessness that the question comes to us (*Of Hospitality* 70). This is a utopia not of fixity, but of displacement. It is precisely at this point that her analysis turns to the ambiguity surrounding the concept. Twentieth-century political utopias failed, she argues, the moment they sought to take root in “the reality of a place, a country, a power,” when their “nostalgia for a timeless fixity” congealed into ideology (72). They became dangerous not because they were utopian, but because they ceased to be utopian. Dufourmantelle, however, does not abandon the utopian horizon, asking instead whether we should not hear in political utopia “a ‘placelessness’ which opens the possibility of the human ‘city’” (74). In this perspective, hospitality belongs to the logic of the not-yet-located, to the logic of arrival without warning. It is a utopia that “nowadays can only be audible because it breaks its way in from the other, from that unexpected and always disturbing guest” (74). The aporia of hospitality identified by Derrida—the irreducible tension between the “unconditional Law” and the “conditional laws”—confirms this: hospitality as such cannot be fully realized within existing legal and political orders (75–77). It perpetually eludes the institutions and structures that attempt to contain it. Thus, we are speaking not of impossibility, but of the conditions of possibility.

This aporetic horizon is taken up in a different register in Paweł Jędrzejko’s opening essay, “The Professor *Is* Your Friend,” which frames hospitality not so much as a thematic concern as an ethical and epistemic condition of academic life—one that both enables and unsettles the very possibility of knowledge, relation, and institutional responsibility. It is from within this perspective that the essays collected in the “Features” section of this issue of *RIAS* may be read as explorations of the paradoxes of hospitality in a variety of forms. Across these contributions, we encounter echoes of its internal yet necessary contradiction, as described by Kołakowski, alongside a persistent warning against the comfort of indifference of the kind that Zygmunt Bauman cautions us about. Taken together, they return us to the question once posed by Dufourmantelle: is it not the case that, in the arrival

of the stranger, we encounter the fundamental structure of our own existence, and that the hospitality we offer to others is always preceded by the hospitality we ourselves have received? The subject of American hospitality thus emerges through perspectives that, at first glance, appear widely divergent—Latina fiction, dystopian speculative literature, war memoirs, the graphic novel, neo-gothic, fragmentary prose, and the development of the sonnet. What ultimately connects these approaches is not so much a shared keyword as a common conviction: that hospitality is not merely a convenient topic for academic inquiry, but, above all, a structure that shapes both our sense of belonging—to places and communities—and our ways of narrating experience.

The question that arises at the outset of the “Features” section is a socio-political one: what does it mean to arrive—and to be accepted or rejected—in the United States? John T. Matteson reads the prose of Julia Alvarez, Quiara Alegría Hudes, and Sandra Cisneros, revealing the erosion of Latina communities that accompanies the immigrant experience. At the same time, he expands the concept of hospitality, recognizing it in the very fabric of Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*. Magdalena Dziurzyńska’s essay on Sabrina Vourvoulias’s *Ink* speculates about a future in which the hostility latent in today’s immigration policy materializes as a biopolitical machine: migrants are tattooed, marked, and confined in what the novel calls the “inkatorium.” Katarzyna Macedulska, in her reading of Sandra Uwiringiyimana’s *How Dare the Sun Rise*, focuses on testimony, showing how a memoir can become a space in which a stateless person, through storytelling, creates a sense of belonging denied to her by the state.

We then turn to genres more typically associated with popular culture. The essay by Polina Golovátina-Mora and Anna Maria Karczewska shifts the geographical frame to Colombia, reading the graphic novel *En el ombligo* as a meditation on the hospitality extended to—or withheld from—former FARC combatants returning to civilian life. The authors juxtapose the ideas of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, raising a question that resonates quietly throughout the entire volume: what does hospitality require of a community asked to receive not the defenseless stranger, but one who was once a threat? Magdalena Łapińska’s reading of T. Kingfisher’s *What Moves the Dead* carries the volume into the register of the nonhuman. A parasitic fungus that transforms its hosts into hostages, a manor house in which it is no longer safe to dwell—Łapińska’s eco-gothic analysis of Kingfisher’s reimagining of Poe shows how the host–guest relation, once extended to the nonhuman, loses its reassuring asymmetry.

The “Features” section closes with two essays that approach hospitality not as a thematic category, but as a formal one. Dominika Ferens’s analysis of Sigrid Nunez’s fragmentary prose proposes narrative hospitality as a poetics: Nunez’s discontinuous, interrupted mode of narration is read as structurally egalitarian, opening the text to voices and presences—of animals, the elderly, the excluded—that conventional novelistic form would marginalize or silence. Marcelina Kalinowska’s analysis of the African American sonnet tradition draws on Derrida’s concept of unconditional hospitality—which, as she notes, requires relinquishing control over one’s own space to a degree that threatens its transformation—to read the history of Black poets’ entry into the sonnet as a history of coerced, refused, and, finally, insurgent hospitality.

The “Varia” section presents three additional papers that do not constitute a thematically unified group. Rachmat Nurcahyo offers an intertextual analysis of two closely related narratives: Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970) and its adaptation, *Saga of the Sioux* (2011), demonstrating how the central themes of the original—namely, spirituality and cultural identity—have been subject to editorial and, more significantly, ideological modification. Ernesto Domínguez López and Susana Hernández Plá examine the rhetoric of American political discourse in the 1930s, centered on the notion of “progress,” showing how the ostensibly egalitarian language employed by Herbert Hoover and Franklin Delano Roosevelt reinforced prevailing racial hierarchies in the United States. Justyna Fruzińska turns to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s renowned short story “Young Goodman Brown,” a text that has been extensively analyzed and interpreted for nearly two centuries. Her reading is grounded in American pragmatism, specifically the variant developed by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Throughout her analysis, Hawthorne emerges as a precursor to this philosophical movement.

The issue comes to a close with the “Book Reviews” section, where Ritvik Singh Sabharwal discusses the memoir of Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives (2007–2011; 2019–2023), published in 2024. The reviewer reads this narrative as a valuable ethnographic document and a strong—at times even authoritative—feminist voice, resonating against the backdrop of a deeply polarized American democracy. In this way, the volume concludes by returning to the question of voice, authority, and political belonging that has, in different forms, informed the contributions gathered throughout this issue.

If hospitality remains, as we have suggested, both necessary and impossible, it is not because it fails to realize itself, but because

it resists closure. It endures as an ethical demand precisely to the extent that it cannot be fully secured—neither in law, nor in institution, nor even in intention. To think hospitality, then, is not to define it once and for all, but to remain exposed to its call: to the arrival of the other who unsettles what we take to be our place, our knowledge, and our right to speak. In this sense, the essays gathered in this volume do not offer solutions so much as they sustain a space in which this exposure may be practiced—across languages, forms, histories, and disciplines. It is here, perhaps, that the work of American studies, as envisioned by the International American Studies Association, finds one of its most urgent tasks: not to stabilize meaning, but to host it in motion; not to resolve difference, but to remain answerable to it.

Jacek Partyka and Marcelina Wieczorek
Guest Editors

Abstract: This introduction to the *RIAS* thematic issue argues that hospitality is, by its very nature, a utopian concept: an ideal recognized as both necessary and real, yet one that, in its fullest form, remains forever out of reach. Rather than treating this as a failure, the essay suggests that the irreducible tension between conditional and unconditional hospitality is precisely what sustains it as an ethical imperative. Drawing on a range of theoretical frameworks—from Immanuel Kant’s cosmopolitanism and Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of the Other, through Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle’s aporia of hospitality and ontology of risk, to Leszek Kołakowski’s dialectic of the regulative idea and Zygmunt Bauman’s diagnosis of *mixophobia*—it maps the diverse dimensions of hospitality. These frameworks—linguistic, narrative, carnal, and ecological—are further illuminated through brief readings of American literary texts by Henry Roth, Herman Melville, and W. H. Auden, alongside references to erasure poetry by M. NourbeSe Philip, Tracy K. Smith, and Layli Long Soldier. The essay ultimately argues that literature enacts hospitality rather than merely defining it, performing at the level of form what philosophy can only propose at the level of argument. The individual contributions gathered in the “Features” section of the issue extend this inquiry across a range of genres and traditions, including Latina fiction, dystopian speculative literature, war memoirs, the graphic novel, neo-gothic writing, and the African American sonnet tradition.

Keywords: hospitality, utopia, American literature, translation, risk, erasure

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lant, Cynthia Ozick, Charles Reznikoff), W. H. Auden's reinvention of himself as a poet in the United States, and the literature of the Jewish diaspora in New York City. He is the author of *Disarchiving Anguish: Charles Reznikoff and the Modalities of Witnessing* (2021), which, drawing on archival material, analyzes the use of authentic testimonies (including the *National Reporter* and the Eichmann trial records) in the creation of the so-called poetic recitatives by Charles Reznikoff, one of the leading American Objectivist poets.

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“FEROCIOUS ROOTS”: HOSPITALITY, IDENTITY, AND EXCLUSION IN RECENT AMERICAN LATINA LITERATURE

When I was formulating this article, my thoughts turned, oddly enough, to Ethel Merman. For the uninitiated, Ethel Merman was a popular American entertainer from Broadway’s golden age. Gifted with a big voice and a brassy demeanor, she starred in such musicals as *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Gypsy*, and *Hello, Dolly*. Merman was, in her heyday, the seldom-disputed queen of American musical comedy. In 1964, she was married to an Academy Award-winning actor, Ernest Borgnine. Their union didn’t go very well; the happy couple separated after only six weeks. When she published her memoir, Merman exacted a pretty piece of revenge in a chapter titled “My Marriage to Ernest Borgnine.” When readers, eager for gossip and revelations, flipped to that chapter, they discovered a single blank page.

That story connects well with the subject of the conference under whose auspices this work was conceived: American Hospitality. Given observable trends in American society during most of my lifetime, most of which have rendered my country dramatically less hospitable, I have felt the temptation to honor Miss Merman by submitting my own blank page for publication. To do so might, perhaps, be a worthy piece of performance art. However, an empty article version of a noteless keynote would also present a true test for the hospitality of the editors of this volume, who would be more than justified in returning my submission posthaste, along with some very uncharitable and non-literary suggestions. Therefore, both good manners and a fondness for my reputation urge me to continue.

Another option would be simply to quote liberally from Robert D. Putnam’s excellent study of community in America, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Putnam argues that,

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in part, because of its largely money-driven ethos, the United States has come to chronically neglect another essential form of wealth—the value deriving from sustained and sincere human interaction, to which Putnam refers as social capital. Since the 1950s, Americans have taken less and less of a part in every kind of informal and formal institution that used to bring Americans together, ranging from bowling leagues and bridge clubs to charitable organizations and political parties. In meticulous detail and with deep statistical analysis, Putnam's book chronicles and examines this sobering trend. With the decline of these institutions has come a commensurate lessening of interpersonal trust. And that diminution of trust has occurred, not only on an individual level, but also on a national one, as one observes in the currently rising hostility of Americans toward newly arriving foreigners, especially toward those from disadvantaged countries.

This text will approach the problem of hospitality with perspectives drawn from two fields of inquiry: social theory and literary study. On the sociological side, it will argue that some of the blame for the decline of hospitality falls on our ingrained habits of transactional, market-based thinking, a system whose virtues are evermore subject to question. But it will also argue, perhaps more controversially, that the decline of American hospitality also has its roots in liberalism—a societal gospel in which my faith is generally strong, but whose insufficiencies are becoming more evident by the year. Turning to the literary side, this piece will examine a trio of Latina authors: Julia Alvarez, Quiara Alegria Hudes, and Sandra Cisneros, in an attempt not only to discover why hospitality is to an extent missing in America, but also to understand what hospitality truly is.

First, a somewhat obvious observation: literature inherently thrives on depictions of conflict and dysfunction. Writers and readers alike are more drawn to disharmony than to its opposite. Thus, without more, the kindly person who always keeps a made bed and a pot of soup ready for whoever may require it invites less artistic interest than the misanthrope who roughly shuts the door in the undeserving stranger's face. Within this point, of course, we find room for exceptions: one of literature's greatest achievements, *Les Misérables*, begins with an elaborate portrait of Monsignor Myriel, surely one of the most hospitable figures in any important work of fiction. But I think the general practice leans toward depictions of conflict, and we may therefore expect literature to supply more violations of the rules of hospitality than instances of conformity. Most often, art is concerned with the struggles of a particular protagonist, a figure whose experiences of social discontent may or may not be intended to stand for those of a community, a nation,

or a species. A hero perfectly at home in his surroundings is almost assuredly a boring one. And because, for the most part, it cares most about the subjective experience of a handful of imagined individuals, a novel, play, or short story has only so much value as sociological evidence. A literary work can help us to expose and understand behaviors that we disapprove, but it is less reliable in telling us how prevalent that behavior actually is. So, it is with those caveats in mind that we move forward.

Consider, if you will, that most hospitable of English phrases, “Make yourself at home.” Hospitality at its best seeks to encourage the guest or stranger to feel at ease, to sense that she or he *belongs*. To the extent that the subject finds it impossible to enjoy the relaxed feeling of having been accepted, of feeling *at home*, hospitality has failed. True hospitality, I would suggest, also contemplates some degree of voluntary sharing: how generous or genuine can a welcoming attitude be if it is a service offered for sale? (I will admit here that I have always been faintly troubled by the decision to refer to businesses like hotels and restaurants as “the *hospitality industry*.” A hospitality that is purely transactional feels like a very attenuated virtue.) Indeed, the widespread use of the phrase, “hospitality industry,” may offer some clues as to just how strongly the American mind has learned to associate hospitality with the sale of professional services. It would be foolish to argue that capitalism has driven all evidence of warmth and good will out of what we now call hospitality; to the contrary, it seems likely that hotels and restaurants are more likely to succeed if they deliver their service with a caring attitude. Nevertheless, we have come a long way from the ancient world, in which the Greeks considered the welcoming of strangers so important that they made it a moral obligation and a political imperative. Hospitality was, in fact, a core virtue so essential that its immortal patron was Zeus, the greatest of the gods. We are distant as well from the traditions of ancient Hinduism, which are rife with stories of strangers who, having been welcomed by an unsuspecting host, reveal themselves to be avatars of divinity. We in our own time are not nearly so likely to tell ourselves, “The Guest is God.” We tend to tell ourselves instead that hospitality is something that you buy.

But it is not just that hospitality has become commodified. Equally important is a question of character, and the kind of character that our political assumptions foster. We are falling victim to some unforeseen consequences of the entire philosophy of liberal self-reliance, a set of beliefs that has been ascendant in America since the days of Emerson. Democratic liberalism is the paradise of the talented, able-bodied

radical individual. Except at the limits set by legality, it is an ideology that does not judge how we define our goals in life. Instead, it seeks to create political and economic structures through which one's goals may be efficiently achieved. And here's the catch: by creating so much space and deference for individual growth and gain, liberalism eats away at social connection and community. Emphasizing the transactional elements of life, it ignores the transcendent. In an individualist, self-regarding culture, a person may have incentives to be superficially pleasant, whereas divine injunctions about loving, protecting, and sheltering our neighbors command little or no allegiance. We look to the *systems* of democracy and capitalism to create hospitable conditions for the triumph of talent, ambition, and energy. Our personal hospitality matters less and less. As a source of values and vindication, we are left with what, in the 1960s, Sir Kenneth Clark referred to as "heroic materialism" (347). Clark knew that it was an insufficient value then. It is no more satisfying now.

One finds, as well, an atmosphere of presumptive distrust in American society that has grown more palpable throughout my lifetime. Let us return for a few minutes to *Bowling Alone*. Hospitality, it should go without saying, depends on trust. I welcome you into my home or into my country with the confidence that you will repay me with gratitude and responsible behavior. You enter my home or country with the hope and expectation that you will be treated with respect and dignity. For this relation to function, it must exist not only regarding individuals we already know intimately and have specific reasons to trust—what Putnam calls "thick trust,"—but also to some lesser degree with regard to someone whom we don't know and whom we trust simply because of our general belief that people are trustworthy (136). We base our actions on a kind of standing decision that most people deserve the benefit of the doubt—what Putnam calls "thin trust." Thin trust is actually more important than thick trust because it expands our radius of trusting relations beyond the number of people we can actually know. Beyond the emotional benefits that come with believing that human society is, on balance, a trustworthy place to be, a social atmosphere of thin trust confers demonstrable economic benefits. The more a culture can depend on trust and less on force or legal action to enforce its bargains, the more efficient it will be. Moreover, as Putnam points out, *within* any given society, the well-to-do are more trusting than the disadvantaged. Trust and trustworthiness pay dividends.

And yet, in the United States of America, perceptions of the trustworthiness of others have steadily declined. In 1952, asked whether they

thought people were as honest and moral as they used to be, over half of all respondents said yes. By 1998, Americans who considered their fellow human beings to be as good as they used to be were outnumbered by the misanthropes three to one (Putnam 139). In the first edition of *Bowling Alone*, published in the year 2000, Putnam observed parallel declines in both civic engagement and organizational involvement. In the preface to the revised twentieth anniversary edition, published six years ago, Putnam reports that civic engagement, organizational involvement, and social trust have all continued without interruption on their downward path (Putnam 2). Bowling leagues, bridge clubs and fraternal organizations, which were once fixtures in the American social landscape, have dwindled and often vanished.

The years since *Bowling Alone's* first edition have, of course, witnessed the rise of social media. Studies cited in Putnam's revised edition indicate that the increase in access to the Internet has accelerated the previous declines in civic engagement. Whereas, on the one hand, social media have made it dramatically easier to maintain long-distance friendships, the connections it most ably fosters are just that: distant. Where physical presence is absent, so, too, is the true interpersonal bond that is the lifeblood of human interactions. As Putnam puts it, "we [are] communicating more but listening less. Our devices allow the illusion of connection without the demands of friendship and conversation" (425). Among the lessons of the COVID-19 shutdown is this: human beings are not wired for social distancing. The truly personal, the face-to-face—these are the evident foundations of societal and emotional health. As the respected religious scholar Albert J. Raboteau once told me, "There is no substitute for contact."

Without doubt, other contributors to this volume will address thoroughly and eloquently the disastrous turn away from hospitality that has marked American immigration policies since the regrettable rise of Trump, and this essay will leave that exploration largely to them. However, I do feel qualified to speak anecdotally on the subject of hospitality as it relates to American immigration. Since 1997, I have taught proudly at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in the City University of New York. Approximately thirty percent of John Jay's student body is foreign born. Add in our number of students born in the USA to immigrant parents, and you have described more than half of our student population. To the hordes of lunatics and criminals that the Republican Party so colorfully and fancifully imagines as constituting our new arrivals, these students do not bear the slightest resemblance. They are dedicated, hard-working, and generally cheerful about their chances in the Land of the Free—if only that

land will actually give them a chance. My college is in the business of creating those chances. It stands among the top ten colleges nationally, both on raising students from the working class into the middle class and in getting Latinx students admitted to law school. I think better of myself knowing that I work for an institution that provides a beacon of hope and a place of true hospitality for the eager and ambitious from other shores. And it makes me sad that a major political party in my country would gladly extinguish that beacon with hardly a hesitation. In John Jay's view, in my own view, America represents a promise. It is a promise that we vow to keep.

We shall now move a bit abruptly from the sociological to the literary. At the core of my argument is the hypothesis that the act of writing for an audience is, in its own peculiar way, an act of hospitality. The writer invites us into the living space of her or his thoughts—a sanctum far more private and personal than any apartment or living room. We, the readers, are offered a guided tour of this space—its bright spaces, its architectural curiosities, and its dark corners. The writer shares with us the music of her or his mental space and, if the connection is deeper, serves us a generous helping of an idea, garnished with experience and washed down with a draught of speculation. But there is a profound difference between the hospitality of the conventional host and that of the writer, and it is this: the writer is under no obligation to make the reader comfortable. Indeed, on some occasions, an impolite author may gratify us more than a gracious and obliging one. By the same token, we, as readers, are free to leave at any time, without even so much as a thank you. I am thinking, somewhat arbitrarily, of Lockwood's stumbling entry into Heathcliff's abode at Wuthering Heights. He enters with every naïve expectation that at least the formalities of welcoming will be observed, only to find, at every turn, gestures of defiance and barely checked hostility. He feels the uneasiness that comes with unsolvable mysteries. But it is Lockwood's very discomfort that draws him further in; he will wrestle with this place and its meanings, and he will not banish it from his mind until he knows it, through and through. A guest like Lockwood never ceases to desire hospitality and acceptance, but it is his having been denied it that spurs him onward to feats of probing and reflection.

I have chosen for the essential core of my remarks a triad of female Hispanic-American authors, each of whom offers particular insight into the question of hospitality in America: Julia Alvarez, Quiara Alegria Hudes, and Sandra Cisneros. Alvarez's novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, captures in prose both the sentiment of forever looking backward and the tension between the new and old

identity of someone who has found a lack of hospitality in an unfamiliar place. The very title of the book conveys a hint of this tension; although the book purports to tell about the loss of one's foreign accent, the diacritic mark over the "i" in the family name *García* remains conspicuously present, a reminder that the former selves of the four sisters have not been forever extinguished. Moreover, the structure of the book breathes a spirit of nostalgia. To emphasize the yearning for an unrecoverable past, the anecdotes that comprise the narrative are told in reverse chronological order. As our knowledge of the protagonists deepens, we move further into their earlier lives and closer to the family's origins in the Dominican Republic. In reading this tale of assailed and compromised identity, we feel the narrative leading us against the currents of time, charting a magical course toward its recovery. As the story moves forward, it moves backward, in a fashion mimetic of the functions of memory, and memory is made the more poignant because the things recalled are inaccessible, not only because of the passage of time, but also by the barriers of geography. We learn that, in the old country, Mr. García was a man of wealth and influence who was forced to flee along with his family after taking part in a failed attempt to overthrow the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. Thus, during the family's early years in the USA, Thomas Wolfe's famous phrase is a political reality: you can't go home again. The time and place where these characters were always welcome, where hospitality needed not even be thought of, will never again be experienced in the same way.

A pivotal chapter in the book, titled "The Rudy Elmenhurst Story," chiefly concerns the book's central character, Yolanda García. Alvarez's novel not only features a quartet of sisters, but also foregrounds the sibling who aspires to become a writer and who sometimes goes by the nickname "Joe." The echoes of *Little Women* are highly audible. Alcott's March sisters continually confront the discomforts of being a relatively poor family within a prosperous and occasionally snobbish social circle. However, thanks to their Anglo-Saxon ancestry, they are never prompted to question their place in American society writ large. It goes otherwise with the García sisters. In "The Rudy Elmenhurst Story," Joe has enrolled in a collegiate creative writing seminar. She seeks, by mastering the tropes of her new country's literature, to find a toehold of acceptance. To the contrary, however, the class is, for her, an experience of exclusion; she feels like an unbidden intruder into a sanctuary of English majors. Fascinatingly, the gesture that makes her most painfully conscious of her otherness is one that is intended to have the opposite effect. Alvarez writes:

He called roll, acknowledging most of the other students with nicknames and jokes and remarks, stumbling over my name and smiling falsely at me, a smile I had identified as one flashed on “foreign students” to show them the natives were friendly. I felt profoundly out of place. (71)

In these brief lines, Alvarez encapsulates the inwardly contradictory nature of hospitality. Hospitality, of course, seeks to include. However, unless the tact that accompanies it is practically perfect, its exercise implies distance that conveys a message that differs from inclusion. The hospitable nod or smile does not really mean: “You are one of us.” Rather, it means, “You are different. We perceive and know that you are different. But just see how polite we are being about it!” While appearing to be concerned with the comfort of the recipient, the gesture is really about the self-perceived openness of the giver, who either does not recognize or cannot conceal the inherent hint of paternalist condescension.

Perhaps justifiably, one might argue that Joe is being overly sensitive—that a well-intentioned smile from a professor should be accepted in the best spirit and promptly moved on from. But the professor’s awkward welcome is only a prelude to the much more egregious false hospitality of the classmate who gives his name to the story. Rudolph Brodermann Elmenhurst III relies on his rakish charm and recklessly forward demeanor to win Yolanda as a girlfriend. She gradually discovers, however, that he has the mindset of a would-be stay-at-home sexual tourist, whose parents approve of his pursuit of Yolanda as a kind of hands-on geography lesson in a different culture. At the end of their relationship, which has consisted mostly of his arrogant romantic advances and her uncomfortable denials, Rudy discloses the stereotype-spewing bigotry that attracted him to her in the first place:

“You know,” he said, “I thought you’d be hot-blooded, being Spanish and all, and that under all the Catholic bullshit, you’d be really free, instead of all hung up like these cotillion chicks from prep schools. But Jesus, you’re worse than a fucking Puritan.” (Alvarez 99)

Rudy’s vulgar rejection is, for Joe, a sad revelation. She recalls, “I saw what a cold, lonely life awaited me in this country. I would never find someone who understood my peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles” (Alvarez 99). Yolanda is looking for the hospitality, not only of a different country, but that all-too-rare hospitality of a comprehending heart, the uncommon kindness of a soul that approaches another, not with a desire to dominate or possess, but to deeply and genuinely sympathize. When we consider the actual

contours of human need, we begin to realize that hospitality alone is essentially a minimum. The heart craves more than to be treated like a guest. It seeks not a mere hostelry but rather a home. In this highly relatable sense, all but the most fortunate of us are, in a sense, emotional foreigners, seeking a haven whose contours truly correspond to our inner nature. That haven bears the simple but complex name of love.

Yet it is a well-known feature of the human condition that the frustration of our desires may eventually benefit us more than their fulfillment, and so it turns out to be with Joe. We learn that, back home in the Dominican Republic, she was a terrible student, whom no one could force to open a book. Alvarez observes, however, “In New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language. By high school, the nuns were reading her stories and compositions out loud in English class” (Alvarez 141). Language is a filler of voids—not only of silences and the distances between people, but also of the empty spaces within the individual. In her loneliness, in the very condition of having been denied hospitality, Joe uses words to construct her space of safety and of value. Language and literature are also, for her, the tools of challenge and competition, the mastery of which may make her, in at least one precious sense, more American than the established Americans. Had there been no gaps in and around her, it seems unlikely that her linguistic creativity would ever have flourished. Communication expresses need. It is in the aching lacunae of life that the profoundest speech is formed.

Quiara Alegria Hudes, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for her play *Water by the Spoonful*, has reflected meaningfully on the relation between language and the at-home feeling that we seek through hospitality. The daughter of a Jewish father and a Puerto Rican mother, she faced all the slights and subtle exclusions that await an American child of mixed ancestry. Hudes’s salvation came through music and, crucially, through reading. She has referred to her fluency in the Western canon as her “emergent superpower”—an acquired linguistic ease that, she says, “brought exhilaration and comfort because, if you’re fluent in a language, there’s a place you belong” (Hudes, *My Broken Language* 127). For Hudes, one of the core purposes of writing is to make our world a more congenial home and habitat. She asserts, “Each story is two stories: its absence and presence; its voice and silence. What would the world be without this particular story? What is the world now, with this story? Write the ones that fill a void. The ones whose absence would make a less complete world” (177).

And yet, with all her appreciation of language and its ability to close our gaps and to complete our realities, Hudes also recognizes that language alone cannot produce the rich atmosphere of welcome and belonging that the human organism requires. *Water by the Spoonful* comments insightfully on the displacement of hospitality in the age of social media. The action begins very shortly before the death of Ginny Ortiz, a kindly North Philadelphia woman whose determined and non-judgmental hospitality has long been the emotional glue that has held her neighborhood together. Based on Hudes's real-life grandmother, Ginny has been a wellspring of community: she has always left her door open. We learn that she has planted community gardens and installed wheelchair ramps for the disabled. Ginny never appears on stage; the audience knows her only through the affectionate and wistful recollections of those who knew her. In the context of the play, Ginny figures most prominently as the subject of a eulogy. She belongs to an irretrievable past, as does her kind of genuine, attentive and universal hospitality. Always "having a fresh pot of rice and beans ... for any hungry stranger," Ginny has built her community, not with a chatroom or blog posts, but "with a hammer and nails" (69, 67).

It is a major point of Hudes's drama that deep face-to-face hospitality has been swept aside in the era of social media. Indeed, the most actively functioning community in *Water by the Spoonful* is an online chat room, with participants in Philadelphia, San Diego, and Japan, open only to recovering crack addicts. Through the agency of the internet, community and hospitality are transmuted into unprecedented forms. Utterly detached from physical reality, the word becomes all. It becomes the sole conveyer of emotion and the unique bearer of character and identity. No longer limited by space and no longer inhibited by the expectation of personal contact, Hudes's characters enjoy broader possibilities but also encounter new pitfalls. The patrons of the chatroom are partially anonymous; each has a handle that differs from their actual name. Freed from the requirement of being physically present for one another, they are also freed from the burdens of their personal histories; they are free to invent themselves anew. For some participants, this last chance at community works, saving them from relapse and likely death. For most, it fails. As one of them observes:

It usually doesn't end up so good. One in twenty, maybe, hang around. Most people just don't write one day and then thirty days and then you're wondering ... And sometimes you get the answer. Cuz their wife looks on their computer and finds the website and logs on and writes, "I found him face down in the snow." (48)

At the center of the chat space is Odessa, a Puerto Rican woman who signs herself online as Haikumom. We discover that she is actually Ginny Ortiz's sister. But, in stark contrast to the saintly Ginny, Odessa, in her real life, has failed catastrophically at the basic demands of community. Decades earlier, her infant daughter died during a bout of stomach flu because Odessa was too far under the influence of drugs to keep the girl hydrated. Odessa/Haikumom is the link between the two "worlds" of the play—the online space of www.recovertogether.com and the real world where characters interact in person. She is also central because the divided nature of these two worlds reflects a parallel division within her. Online, she is anonymously benevolent, providing a safe space for crack addicts who are trying to get over their habits. Perhaps above all else, Odessa in her alter ego as Haikumom is, as her online handle suggests, motherly—giving guidance, censoring foul language. And, of course, it is as a mother that she has failed spectacularly in her real life, letting a daughter die because of her drug habit. *Water by the Spoonful* excels in demonstrating how the internet has revolutionized identity—enabling people to get second chances and to create second selves. You were a bad mother? Here's your opportunity to learn from your failures and try again. But a kind of fraudulence lies at the core of Odessa's attempted reformation. The past cannot be altered; at best, it can be concealed. Odessa can resurrect her moral being only by rewriting herself as a fictional character. When her fictions are inevitably exposed, she again descends precipitously into crack use, and nearly dies. Even in the best of times, in the chatroom imagined in *Water by the Spoonful*, hospitality is contingent, frail, and imperfect in its capacity to support and to sustain. As in life itself, the online environment offers powerful temptations toward incivility: the participants are sometimes no more generous or respectful toward one another than a drive-by shooter. One might optimistically expect the chatroom to become a place where the participants could set aside their racial differences and class antagonisms, thereby reaping the benefits of a kind of disembodied, Platonic equality. Alas, not so. Recriminations and f-bombs fly freely. The privileged status of a white computer programmer infects a black government employee with deep feelings of inferiority, prompting him to lash out with furious insults and cruel accusations. Despite some grim subject matter, Hudes's story is, in the end, optimistic; the main characters resolve into essentially happy pairs. Yet we also feel an atmosphere of comparative emptiness. We know that the bygone world of open doors and warm welcomes represented by Ginny Ortiz is a grievous loss, for which the chatroom is a flawed and feeble substitute.

Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* does not merely comment on hospitality and its absence: it openly strives to be a hospitable text. The book does not limit itself to a single front door: in writing it, the author imagined "people who are busy working for a living [people who] deserve beautiful little stories, because they don't have much time and are often tired" (xvii). She intended "a book that can be opened at any page and will still make sense to the reader who doesn't know what came before or comes after" (xvii). More importantly, in this house of many doors, there is no gatekeeper in the form of needless complexity. Cisneros recalls that she emphatically did *not* "want to write a book that a reader won't understand and would feel ashamed for not understanding" (xvii). Those words appear in Cisneros's introduction to *The House on Mango Street*, and it remains heartening to read them. One grows easily and justifiably frustrated with the academicized nature of literary studies: the way in which our profession, hoping to appear more "professional," tends to exalt and fetishize the esoteric and the obscure, fostering a cultural divide that mirrors the political division that tragically plagues America. Far too much writing about literature is delivered with an elitist sneer, wrapped in an impenetrable sleeve of jargon. As a profession, we are, too often, hell bent on shaming and alienating the lay person and, in so doing, making ourselves as repellent and laughable to the general public as we possibly can. Cisneros reminds us that literature, properly understood, is a labor of inclusion—of making the thoughts and experiences of the Other comprehensible and sympathetic, of using language as a bridge, not as a forbidding wall topped with strands of barbed wire spun out of hierarchical hegemonic hermeneutics.

The House on Mango Street deals with exclusion and the want of hospitality with singular insight and grace, gently and modestly probing the psychology that emerges in inhospitable places. Cisneros subtly argues that places in which we feel alien do more than make us feel out of place in an external surrounding. With time, the unwelcoming environment makes a person inwardly hostile to herself. This happens because, like it or not, places leave their mark on us. They become part of who we are, no matter how furiously we may wish to deny the infiltration. Although she finds herself *in* Mango Street, the book's protagonist, Esperanza Cordero, struggles consciously not to let Mango Street become a part of her. "This isn't my house," she declares to a friend, and shakes her head as if the shaking can undo the time she has lived there. "I don't belong," she adds. "I don't ever want to come from here" (106). To Esperanza, the street comes to signify poverty, lack of protection, thwarted opportunity, and sexual humiliation—all forces that shape her experience but which

she never wants to shape her identity. She despises Mango Street. To let its influences become a part of her would require her to detest a portion of herself. The place that shows so little hospitality to her makes her inhospitable to the totality of her own being.

Her relationship to her ostensible home is, in this way, one of grim-faced resistance, but even this spirit of resistance acts upon her in a formative fashion. In a work with many splendid rhetorical moments, possibly the most sublime is the extended pathetic fallacy titled “Four Skinny Trees,” which deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here. Four raggedy excuses planted by the city. From our room we can hear them, but Nenny just sleeps and doesn't appreciate these things.

Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep.

Let one forget his reason for being, they'd all droop like tulips in a glass, each with their arms around the other. Keep, keep, keep, trees say when I sleep. They teach.

When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees. When there is nothing left to look at on this street. Four who grow despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be. (74–75)

Paradox abounds in these brief lines. The passage exudes a tone of mute resistance, but, of course, Esperanza is not mute. Language, indeed, is her ultimate and only way out of her metaphorical prison. A curious effect is created as well when we learn that the secret of the trees' persistence lies in the roots that they thrust into the ground. Granted, these roots teach Esperanza the importance of digging in, of standing one's ground. But the trees are immobile, rooted in the very ground that Esperanza feels she must escape. Resistance to the inhospitable environment entails and demands attaching oneself to the environment all the more deeply. To wrestle against otherness, one must embrace the other, in a union that becomes inextricable.

As character names go, Esperanza is perhaps too overtly on the button. The name, of course, means hope, and Cisneros's novel intends to show us something about the kinds of hopes that it is fitting and proper to have. The lack of hospitality that Esperanza has encountered creates in her a desire to be different. She wants a real house of her own with, as she alliteratively imagines it, “my porch, my pillow, my pretty purple petunias” (108). The repeated possessive pronouns make their point:

the hoped-for security depends on ownership. But Esperanza wants her own space not only for her personal comfort. With the innocent zeal of someone who is lavishly generous with an imaginary fortune that has yet to be earned, she vows that, when she has her house, she will not forget who she is or where she comes from. Cisneros writes:

Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house.
Some days after dinner, guests and I will sit in front of a fire. Floorboards will squeak upstairs.
The attic grumble.
Rats? They'll ask.
Bums. I'll say, and I'll be happy. (87)

Repelled by her life on Mango Street, Esperanza vows to flee it when she can and to never return. Toward the end of the narrative, however, an older woman speaks to her with words that seem to be both a prophecy and a command.

When you leave, you must always remember to come back. [...] You must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are. (105)

Esperanza hangs onto her pledge to leave. But now she knows what her friends and neighbors will not understand: that she will go away *in order to* come back, for the ones who cannot so easily get out. For this forlorn place is, at long last, and in spite of itself, its own community, uniting people even as they feel inwardly divided.

America is a place of almost universal and perpetual displacement. As much as the country may superficially celebrate the virtues of home and the familiar, the stronger impulse of America is to leave home and, often, to erase as much of home from our hearts and minds as we can bear to lose. The search for the next frontier has persisted long after the true frontier vanished into highways, shopping malls, and defiantly bland housing developments. A case can be made that the three quintessential protagonists of American fiction are Ishmael, Huck Finn, and Jay Gatsby. They are all characters who are or have been on the move. The first two are orphans and runaways. For Gatsby, orphanhood is a convenient and appealing fantasy. He firmly rejects his parentage and midwestern roots, telling Nick Carraway that his family are all deceased. In the America of our own time, rootlessness is a badge of accomplishment, success often measured in the miles one

has placed between oneself and the place of one's origins. The prediction, "He or she will go far" is an expression of high praise. Few figures are more tacitly pitied in American culture than the adult child who lives with his parents. I once asked a dear French friend where she would live in France if she could choose any place at all. She replied at once, "Next door to my parents." In the United States, an analogous answer would be almost unthinkable. I once helped a second cousin of mine with a genealogy assignment he was assigned in school, to trace his ancestry in America. The first eleven ancestors I discovered had each settled in a different state. I myself am a native of California. I have not lived there for 34 years and do not expect ever to return. Although the number is increasing, the average length of home ownership in America is only eight years. Astonishingly, nearly one in every five Americans changes address every year (Putnam 204).

Having had typically so relatively little to do with home, is it that much of a wonder that postmodern Americans are losing the talent for making others feel at home, when we are less and less acquainted with this feeling ourselves? Yet this observation speaks in the broadest of generalities, and an important distinction must be made between the general and the particular, in two different respects. First of all, the American trend toward isolation and away from hospitality has an incalculable number of exceptions; one finds everywhere Americans who have retained a spirit of welcome and sympathy for the newly arrived. Secondly, there is a dissonance within American attitudes toward the unfamiliar. Thinking in gross, abstract terms, imagining the Other as a looming, faceless mass, the American often reacts with avoidance and distrust. But when the Other comes to him as an individual in need, the American's generosity is rediscovered. I am reminded of a significant chapter from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which Stowe introduces us to Senator Bird, an Ohio legislator who, just hours earlier, has declared his support for legislation against the interests of fugitive slaves. Happenstance brings two visitors to his door: Eliza and her young son Harry. Senator Bird, who has just confidently displayed his intolerance for an entire class and race of his fellow countrymen, gives copious aid to the two runaways, thus violating the very law he has supported. Perhaps it is true that American attitudes toward the unfamiliar have not changed so much from the time of Stowe and abolition. So long as we are able to put ideology out of the way, so long as we continue to see with our own eyes the unmet human needs around us, Americans will, with their unselfish actions, continue to write encouraging chapters in the history of hospitality.

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Abstract: “No, this isn’t my house ... I don’t belong. I don’t ever want to come from here.” With words of cold fury, Sandra Cisneros’s heroine Esperanza Cordero rejects the place in Chicago that her family has attempted to embrace as its new home. The embrace is prickly and problematic, as young Esperanza struggles to find an identity, to cope with sexual harassment, and to resist being defined by her parents’ crumbling, one-bedroom house on Mango Street. This essay seeks to understand the problems of community and its threatened loss as they are addressed by three essential works by three Latina American writers: Julia Alvarez, Quiara Alegria Hudes, and Sandra Cisneros. It also references the groundbreaking sociological work of Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, which examines in more general terms the loss of cohesion and trust in American society. Turning to Alvarez’s novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, the essay pursues the problem of young women whose ethnicity becomes a focus of sexual curiosity and is overtly associated with a presumption of promiscuity. Alvarez’s novel is presented as an exemplar of a nostalgic text, wherein episodes are narrated in reverse chronological order, mimetically evoking a wistful desire to return to a lost heritage, now accessible only through the act of writing. In its treatment of Hudes’s play *Water by the Spoonful*, the essay observes the transvaluation of community that has taken place in the age of social media. The literal open doors of hospitable houses give way to internet chat rooms, in which contact takes place across thousands of miles, but at the palpable expense of true empathy and fellow feeling. In its discussion of Cisneros’s novel *The House on Mango Street*, this essay examines the phenomenon of the hospitable text: a work that an author creates with a conscious desire to create a congenial, comfortable space for the reader, even as the novel’s characters contend with their emotional homelessness in a new land—a condition that persists even when one has a literal roof over one’s head. The essay also observes how the isolation of a sexually tormented girl is made worse by unfamiliar, unwelcoming surroundings.

Keywords: hospitality, identity, community, Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, Quiara Alegria Hudes, Robert D. Putnam

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Review of International American Studies

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WHEN DID HOSPITALITY GET SO HOSTILE?

The US Latinx Diaspora as an American Dystopia
in Sabrina Vourvoulias's *Ink*

The relationship between speculative fiction and social critique has long been a focal point for literary scholars. As a genre that often extrapolates from contemporary issues to imagine alternative futures, speculative fiction provides fertile ground for exploring societal structures, power dynamics, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities. However, the genre's historical roots have often been framed through a narrow, Eurocentric lens, which has minimized the contributions of authors from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. In recent decades, critical discourse has begun to expand, challenging these omissions and highlighting how speculative fiction can serve as a powerful medium for addressing the complexities of identity, oppression, and resistance within diasporic and marginalized communities.

The study of speculative fiction's history and development often necessitates an engagement with critical debates surrounding its literary evolution. These discussions frequently identify Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and the American science fiction pulp magazines of the 1930s¹ as cornerstone texts that shaped the genre's emergence and trajectory. These foundational works,

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1 The 1930s saw the rise of several influential American science fiction pulp magazines that shaped the genre's early development. Among these were *Amazing Stories*, launched by Hugo Gernsback in 1926; *Astounding Stories* (later renamed *Astounding Science-Fiction*), which debuted in 1930 and gained prominence under John W. Campbell Jr.'s editorial leadership from 1937, marking the beginning of science fiction's "Golden Age"; *Wonder Stories*, another Gernsback creation in 1929; and its successor, *Thrilling Wonder Stories* (1936). To learn more about pulp magazines and their historical context, see Brian Attebery's chapter titled "The Magazine Era: 1926–1960" in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*.

while undeniably influential, reflect a canon dominated by white authors, which has shaped perceptions of speculative fiction's origins and historical lineage. For much of its history, scholarly discourse has tended to marginalize or overlook the contributions of authors of color, whose works challenge and expand the boundaries of the genre in profound ways.

Despite its potential to critique societal structures, speculative fiction often reflects the systemic biases of its creators. As Afrofuturist critic Isiah Lavender III observes, "Science fiction often talks about race by not talking about race, makes real aliens, has hidden race dialogues. Even though it is a literature that talks a lot about underclasses or oppressed classes, it does so from a privileged if somewhat generic white space" (*Race* 7). This critique underscores how traditional speculative fiction has historically sidestepped direct discussions of racial identity and inequality, often using alien or other metaphorical constructs as stand-ins for real-world issues.

Yet, as Lavender III also compellingly argues, "Blackness is science fictional in the sense that these flights of fancy have used science to create the fiction of race as it is applied to black people—indeed, to all people of color" (*Afrofuturism* 9). Here, Lavender's observation highlights how science fiction is deeply entwined with the constructed nature of race itself. The genre becomes a lens through which the social fabrication of race can be critiqued, with Blackness embodying a uniquely "science fictional" condition—one shaped by centuries of pseudo-scientific racial hierarchies and cultural alienation.

These insights reveal the dual capacity of speculative fiction: while it has often perpetuated exclusionary perspectives, it also provides a powerful platform for interrogating and deconstructing the social constructs of race, identity, and power. Writers from marginalized communities have embraced this potential, using speculative fiction as a space to reclaim agency, explore alternative futures, and resist hegemonic narratives. Through these efforts, contemporary speculative fiction reimagines its historical framework and becomes a transformative medium for social critique and inclusivity.

As science fiction critics and writers delve deeper into the intersections of race and genre conventions, they continue to uncover works by authors of color who envisioned diverse worlds and alternative futures long before Samuel R. Delany, often credited as the first widely recognized African American science fiction author, published his debut novel *The Jewels of Aptror* in 1962 (Broderick 59). These discoveries highlight a previously underacknowledged legacy of nonwhite authors within speculative fiction, whose contributions challenged

the genre's Eurocentric narratives and laid the foundation for its ongoing transformation.²

Contemporary authors and scholars of science fiction are building on this legacy by promoting inclusivity and rethinking how the genre frames racial difference (Ferreira 13). As Lavender notes, "While otherhood is not exactly a new term, its meaning for sf is innovative because it attempts to change how racial difference is viewed by exposing the history and practice of discrimination operating inside and outside the genre simultaneously while also studying ways writers have used sf to expose and combat racism" (*Race* 8). This insight underscores the genre's capacity to serve as both a mirror and a critique of systemic inequities, illustrating how its speculative elements can amplify discussions about race, discrimination, and resistance. By connecting the past with the present and future, science fiction by authors of color explores the alienation and marginalization often experienced by racialized individuals in predominantly white societies. These themes resonate deeply within the speculative framework, which frequently engages with concepts of otherness, displacement, and identity. For these authors, the genre becomes a potent vehicle for confronting historical and contemporary injustices, blending metaphor with critique. Through their work, they envision futures that challenge the status quo and offer alternative possibilities, asserting the role of science fiction as a vital space for advocacy, reimagination, and transformation.

This transformative potential is further illustrated through the lens of contemporary speculative fiction movements, which emphasize the genre's capacity to reflect diverse racial and cultural experiences. As Joy Sanchez-Taylor outlines in her study *Diverse Futures: Science Fiction and Authors of Color*, four major speculative fiction and racial studies movements currently shape the field in the United States: Afrofuturism, Indigenous Futurism, Asian American speculative fiction, and Latinx speculative fiction (16). Each of these movements engages with unique cultural histories and sociopolitical struggles, using speculative elements to reimagine futures from perspectives often excluded in mainstream science fiction. Afrofuturism, for instance, reclaims Black cultural narratives and interrogates the intersections of race, technology, and power, while Indigenous Futurism envisions futures rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems and resilience.

2 To learn more about overlooked and marginalized science fiction authors of color, see Silvia Kurlat Ares's chapter, "Science Fiction in Latin America: Reading a Hidden Landscape," in *Peter Lang Companion to Latin American Science Fiction* or Darrell B. Lockhart's *Latin American Science Fiction Writers*.

Similarly, Asian American speculative fiction challenges stereotypes and highlights diasporic experiences, and Latinx speculative fiction addresses issues of migration, identity, and colonial legacies. These movements not only diversify the speculative fiction landscape but also reinforce its role as a critical site for resistance and reimagination, demonstrating how science fiction continues to expand beyond its traditionally Eurocentric framework to include voices that reframe and enrich the genre's possibilities (Córdoba and Maguire 19). By foregrounding these movements, authors and scholars alike illuminate the transformative power of speculative fiction as a tool for interrogating systemic inequities and imagining alternative worlds shaped by justice, inclusion, and cultural specificity.

Latinx speculative fiction, often referred to as Latinofuturism, represents a rich and growing field of literary and cultural production. It encompasses a diverse range of speculative narratives created by Latinx writers, including those from Chicanx, Puerto Rican, Cuban American, and other Latin American diasporic communities. This body of work frequently draws on the lived experiences of marginalized groups, including immigrants and borderlands communities, such as those situated along the US–Mexico border. By blending science fiction, fantasy, and magical realism with specific cultural and historical influences, Latinofuturism offers a space for reimaging identity, resistance, and survival in the context of colonialism, displacement, and systemic inequities.

The theoretical framework of Latinofuturism builds significantly on Catherine Ramírez's adaptation of Alondra Nelson's foundational definition of Afrofuturism. Ramírez refines this concept to reflect the specificities of Chicanx culture and its intersections with technology and futurism. As she explains:

Drawing from Nelson's definition of Afrofuturism, I define Chicanafuturism as Chicano cultural production that attends to cultural transformations resulting from new and everyday technologies (including their detritus); that excavates, creates, and alters narratives of identity, technology, and the future; that interrogates the promises of science and technology; and that redefines humanism and the human. (*Deus* 77–78)

In this definition, Ramírez highlights the importance of examining both the material impacts of technological advancement and the cultural narratives that arise in response to these changes. By addressing identity and futurity, Chicanafuturism not only critiques dominant technological paradigms but also reimagines new possibilities for representation and agency. Ramírez further situates Chicanx experiences within

broader frameworks of marginalization and exclusion. She observes that, much like African Americans, Chicanx individuals have historically been excluded from dominant definitions of humanity and objectified within scientific and technological discourses. She notes:

Like African Americans, Chicanos have been barred from Western definitions of the human and denigrated [...]. They, too, have been excluded from and objectified by discourses of science. And they are also generally associated more with a primitive and racialized past than with the technologically enhanced future. Yet, new technologies have transformed Chicanos just as much as they have transformed African Americans and they have enabled us to articulate (to enunciate and link) past, present, and future identities. (*Deus* 77)

Ramírez further emphasizes the transformative power of new technologies in shaping Chicanx identities, asserting that “new technologies have transformed Chicanos just as much as they have transformed African Americans, and they have enabled us to articulate (to enunciate and link) past, present, and future identities” (*Deus* 77). This observation speaks to the ways in which technological advancements serve not merely as tools but as mediums through which marginalized communities can redefine their narratives and assert agency within both historical and futuristic contexts.

Ramírez’s insights highlight the dual imperative of Latinx speculative fiction: to confront the historical erasure of Latinx experiences from dominant narratives of modernity and progress while simultaneously constructing counter-narratives that place these communities at the forefront of technological and cultural innovation. By bridging temporal dimensions—linking the past, present, and future—Latinx speculative fiction actively challenges systemic inequalities, reconfigures dominant cultural paradigms, and reimagines possibilities for identity, community, and resistance. Through this lens, Latinofuturism not only critiques existing structures of exclusion but also expands the boundaries of speculative fiction itself. It becomes a transformative space where Latinx voices can engage with questions of futurity and belonging, imagining vibrant, alternative futures that both acknowledge historical injustices and envision new modes of cultural and technological integration. This dynamic re-envisioning aligns Latinofuturism with broader movements such as Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futurism, positioning it as a critical framework for understanding how speculative fiction can amplify marginalized voices and advocate for a more inclusive future.

Building on the foundational insights of Chicanafuturism, Latinofuturism extends the critical exploration of technology and its impact

on marginalized communities by questioning the promises of science, technology, and humanism for Chicanas, Chicanos, and other people of color. Ramírez notes that Chicanafuturism “articulates colonial and postcolonial histories of indigenismo,³ mestizaje,⁴ hegemony, and survival” (*Afrofuturism* 187), framing these histories as central to its speculative narratives. This articulation not only interrogates the exploitative dynamics embedded in technological progress but also reclaims the voices and experiences of those excluded from dominant discourses on modernity and futurism.

Much like Afrofuturism, which centers the diasporic experiences of African peoples and examines the legacy of slavery in relation to technology, Latinofuturism highlights the displacement and erasure of Latinx communities through themes of migration, indigenismo, and mestizaje. These speculative works foreground the dual realities of being simultaneously depicted as technologically uninformed and exploited as disposable labor—reduced to “human machines.” However, while Afrofuturism often navigates the African diaspora’s engagement with technology and media, Latinofuturism situates its critique within the framework of migrations across and within the Americas. This locational specificity enables Latinofuturism to challenge traditional narratives of progress by presenting alternative, radical futures that decenter Eurocentric visions of technological advancement.

In addition to reimagining collective futures, Latinofuturism serves as a powerful tool for critiquing contemporary societal fears and injustices. Dystopian works within this genre offer piercing examinations of the sociopolitical dynamics surrounding immigration crises, surveillance, and authoritarian responses to demographic changes. These speculative narratives underscore the violent potential of extremist ideologies, portraying the real-world consequences of surveillance technologies used to monitor and control Latinx populations. Such stories not only warn against the encroachment of authoritarianism but also explore the human cost of systemic fear and violence.

Building on the thematic concerns of surveillance, authoritarianism, and the exploitation of Latinx communities, dystopian Latinofuturist narratives offer powerful critiques of the systemic inequalities embed-

3 *Indigenismo* is a political ideology prevalent in several Latin American nations that centers on the interconnectedness between the nation-state and the indigenous nations and peoples within its borders.

4 The term *mestizaje*, derived from Spanish, refers to the cultural and ethnic blending that occurred in Latin America, particularly in Mexico, following the onset of Spanish colonization.

ded in contemporary society. These works frequently use speculative settings to draw attention to the lived realities of marginalized populations, blending political commentary with imaginative storytelling to illuminate urgent societal issues. A notable example of this critical engagement is Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2008), a film that envisions a near-future world where Chicana laborers are transformed into cyborg-like workers, embodying the commodification of human labor and the disposability of immigrant bodies in US society. Similarly, novels like *America Libre* (2009), by Raul Ramos y Sanchez, depict an alternate history in which escalating tensions culminate in another US civil war, ignited by the tragic killing of a young Latina by undercover detectives in San Antonio. Such narratives reveal the fragility of societal cohesion and highlight the racialized violence inherent in enforcement practices. Among these dystopian works, Sabrina Vourvoulias's *Ink* (2012) stands out as a significant exploration of fear, discrimination, and systemic oppression. The novel's speculative premise, where individuals are marked with tattoos that denote their social status, serves as a compelling metaphor for the dehumanization and control of immigrant communities. As the central focus of this academic article, *Ink* offers a profound critique of surveillance and authoritarianism, shedding light on the sociopolitical forces that marginalize Latinx populations.

Sabrina Vourvoulias is a multifaceted writer whose work is deeply informed by her diverse heritage and professional experiences as a journalist, newspaper editor, and blogger. Her upbringing and familial background—an American father of Greek immigrant descent raised in Latin America and a Mexican-born mother who later lived in Guatemala before becoming a US citizen—profoundly shape her creative endeavors (*Ink* 14). These cultural intersections provide a rich foundation for her speculative fiction, particularly her novel *Ink*. First published in 2012 and republished in 2018, *Ink* addresses the fraught realities of immigration through a dystopian lens, blending speculative fiction with sharp political commentary.

The narrative of *Ink* explores the insidious rise of totalitarian immigration laws in the United States, laws that purport to enhance border security while exposing the contradictions of a society dependent on immigrant labor. Central to the story is the implementation of an "identity law" that mandates biometric tattoos on immigrants' wrists in lieu of formal documentation. These tattoos, color-coded to signify differing immigration statuses, serve as permanent markers of alienation and exclusion. Through this premise, Vourvoulias critiques the dehumanization inherent in such policies, portraying

the tattoos not only as tools of control but also as symbols of the systemic marginalization of immigrant communities.

In *Ink*, the color-coded tattoos serve as stark visual markers of the immigrant hierarchy established under the totalitarian “identity bill.” A black tattoo denotes temporary status, green represents a work visa or permanent residency, and blue signifies naturalized citizenship. These individuals, collectively referred to as “Inks,” become physically branded as “other,” symbolizing their exclusion and dehumanization within the rigid framework of the law. By embedding these identifiers into the skin, the system enforces a perpetual state of surveillance and stratification, stripping Inks of individuality and reducing their identities to their immigration status.

The novel centers on four protagonists: one Ink and three non-Ink characters, each offering a distinct perspective on the violence and systemic oppression shaped by restrictive immigration policies. The narrative structure alternates between sections, with each segment named after the protagonist whose viewpoint dominates the chapters within it. This technique enables Vourvoulis to explore how individual experiences and social positions affect perceptions of privilege and vulnerability in a dystopian United States.

The non-Ink characters—Finn, Del, and Abbie—offer contrasting yet interconnected insights into the struggles faced by Inks. Finn, a journalist, investigates issues related to the internment of Inks, bringing an analytical lens to the unfolding crisis. Del, a carpenter, uses his skills to assist activists working to defend Ink rights, embodying the role of a hands-on ally. Abbie, the daughter of a sanatorium supervisor, transitions from a place of relative privilege to active involvement in organizing efforts to liberate the Inks, reflecting a journey toward awareness and solidarity.

Mari, the sole Ink protagonist, provides the most visceral account of the violence and trauma endured by the Ink community. Through her narrative, the novel delves into harrowing experiences of rape, forced internment, and separation from loved ones. Yet Mari’s story also emphasizes resilience and spiritual fortitude, embodied in her connection to her nahual, her spiritual twin. This element of magical realism introduces a dimension of cultural resistance and emotional survival, highlighting the importance of spiritual and ancestral ties in the face of systemic dehumanization. By weaving together these perspectives, Vourvoulis underscores the intersections of identity, power, and resistance, crafting a narrative that interrogates the impact of institutionalized violence while celebrating acts of solidarity and cultural resilience.

The biometric tattoos and the treatment of Inks in the novel serve as a stark allegory for real-world systems of oppression, both in the United States and globally. These practices parallel historical ideologies such as the “one-drop rule” and anti-miscegenation laws, which sought to police racial purity and discourage relationships between different racial or ethnic groups. The novel takes this to a dystopian extreme, where even individuals with only partial “INK blood”—whether from one parent or a single grandparent—are subjected to oppressive regulations. These individuals are forced to conform to the ink codes of conduct and are marked with the indelible tattoos that signify their identity. As Mari, the Ink with a blue tattoo, poignantly states: “My father was American. His blood. It guarantees my citizenship, but in that just as in this, it turns out his blood isn’t strong enough to undo the taint of my mother’s” (57).

The mechanisms of control over Inks extend beyond symbolic markers to encompass physical segregation and systemic disenfranchisement. Population control measures include enforced curfews, segregated buses, and highway identity checkpoints, all of which restrict mobility and reinforce their status as second-class citizens. Inks are further oppressed by cultural erasure; they are mandated to speak English, with the use of any other language being prohibited. This linguistic domination reflects an attempt to strip them of their cultural identity. The dehumanization is further amplified by the requirement that utensils used by Inks in restaurants be destroyed to prevent so-called contamination with non-Inks.

The brutality of these measures is underscored by the role of extremist groups such as “Cleanse America,” which abduct Inks and deport them inhumanely by abandoning them at the border. This chilling depiction of vigilante violence underscores the novel’s critique of xenophobic and racist ideologies, illustrating the extreme lengths to which society might go to uphold systemic oppression. Through these parallels, the novel highlights the enduring relevance of historical and contemporary systems of exclusion, urging readers to reflect on the intersections of identity, privilege, and resistance in the face of institutionalized injustice.

The black tattoos assigned to individuals with temporary visas symbolize an oppressive system of surveillance and control, as they are embedded with GPS trackers that monitor movements and enforce restrictions. These tattoos encode personal data linked to a centralized database, exacerbating the vulnerability of Inks, whose legal status can be altered at a moment’s notice. This dynamic illustrates how bureaucratic systems weaponize technology to dehumanize and dis-

enfranchise. For Mari, her blue tattoo, which signifies US citizenship, carries a similar weight. As she reflects: “Blue lines filled with the story of her life—the way government sees it. They don’t look remotely like blood, but they make me wonder if this is the kind of wound that never stops bleeding” (39). The tattoo, though ostensibly a mark of privilege, becomes a source of existential pain, emblematic of her subjugation within a system that reduces her identity to state-sanctioned data. However, even Mari’s nominal citizenship fails to shield her during a wave of anti-immigrant violence, highlighting the fragility of status in the face of xenophobic fervor. In one chilling episode, Mari is attacked and forcibly deported alongside others, underscoring how state and mob violence converge to erase the protections ostensibly afforded by legal designations. Del, a white citizen who sympathizes with Inks and works alongside them, describes the practice of labeling temporary workers by the names of their countries or regions of origin. As she recounts:

When the tattoos were first instituted, the black tats—temporaries—rotated in six months at a time [...]. We don’t even bother to learn their real names, we mostly call them by the name of their country of origin. Since Chato likes to hire as many Mexicans as possible—and they all can’t be called ‘Mexico’—we call them by Mexican regional names. Right now, we’re on our third Puebla and second Michoacán, along with Liberia and Haiti, Honduras, the third Jalisco and Salvador. (102)

While Del’s intentions may not be overtly malicious, this casual erasure of individual identity perpetuates dehumanization. By reducing individuals to fungible labels based on geographic origin, the practice mirrors the broader structural ethos of objectifying labor and stripping individuals of their humanity. This confluence of surveillance, systemic racism, and dehumanization reflects the novel’s critique of a society where technology and ideology converge to sustain and normalize oppression. The tattoo system becomes a powerful symbol of control, rendering individuals as nothing more than entries in a database while stripping them of agency and reducing their existence to commodified utility.

In the dystopian future depicted in *Ink*, political authorities and institutions extend their control over individuals far beyond traditional governance, employing a range of biopolitical strategies to regulate health, reproduction, and sexuality. Biopolitics, as conceptualized by Michel Foucault, refers to the exercise of power over life itself through the human body, encompassing practices such as surveillance, population control, and biometric identification. This system relies on what Foucault describes as “technologies of control,” mechanisms

that pervade societal structures such as healthcare and law enforcement, compelling individuals to conform to prescribed norms of existence.

The novel provides a harrowing vision of a future America where biopolitics functions as a tool of racial and xenophobic oppression, particularly targeting non-white immigrants and communities of color. Racism, as Foucault observes, “is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die” (258). In *Ink*, this biopolitical division manifests through the systematic identification and control of Inks, positioning them as existential threats to the nation’s “life, health, strength, and longevity” (Foucault 259). Biometric identification emerges as the foundational mechanism for this control, but it is only the beginning. Tattoos and surveillance systems not only mark individuals but serve as the infrastructure for more invasive and radical forms of governance. Under the guise of ensuring national security, the government implements increasingly oppressive policies, underscoring how the apparatus of biopolitics transforms bodies into sites of power and contestation. The novel’s portrayal of bodily regulation and surveillance critiques the ways in which state power commodifies and subjugates marginalized groups, reflecting broader anxieties about the dehumanizing potential of biopolitical governance in contemporary societies. It challenges readers to consider the ethical implications of such technologies and policies, particularly their capacity to entrench systems of inequality and dispossession under the rhetoric of security and order.

When people already become desensitized to injustice, the government sets up “inkatoriums,” “sanatorium-internment centers” that act as quarantine sites for inks. In *Ink*, the government’s implementation of “inkatoriums”—sanatorium-internment centers ostensibly established for quarantine and medical treatment—illustrates how state systems weaponize public health as a tool of oppression. These centers are marketed to the public as necessary, temporary health measures to contain disease outbreaks allegedly more prevalent among the “Ink” population. However, their true function lies in the isolation and dehumanization of immigrants. The inkatoriums exploit public fears of pandemics to erode societal empathy and justify the segregation and ultimate erasure of those marked as “other.”

Initially presented as spaces for medical care, these facilities devolve into sites of irreversible containment where detainees are never released. The narrative escalates with the government’s introduction of forced sterilization programs under the guise of disease control. While initially targeting individuals with communicable or genetically transmittable

conditions, the sterilizations become widespread, indiscriminately targeting all detainees, including children and infants. This policy recalls historical eugenics practices, particularly those of the early twentieth century, where medical science was wielded to enforce racial purity and suppress marginalized populations.

The inkatoriums represent more than just physical containment; they signify the systematic stripping of civil rights. Individuals with black or green tattoos face deportation under an executive order, while those with blue tattoos—previously signifying citizenship—experience a downgrade in their legal status. The degree of their rights becomes contingent upon cooperation with the state, including providing information on others, further fracturing community solidarity.

Sherryl Vint's theoretical framework on the intersection of imperialism and science offers a critical lens through which to view these developments. Vint contends that the politics of empire are deeply inscribed on the bodies of marginalized populations through the application of medical technologies (75). These technologies, particularly those related to outbreak management, have historically been used to racialize disease and fuel anxieties around "the other." The concept of "dread life," as introduced by Vint, encapsulates the fear and devaluation of lives deemed dangerous or expendable under imperial logics (81).

In *Ink*, the conflation of disease management with sterilization and population control reflects domestic policies that parallel imperialist operations abroad. The inkatoriums symbolize a biopolitical apparatus that weaponizes health to dehumanize and disenfranchise, perpetuating systemic inequalities under the guise of public safety. This chilling narrative compels readers to interrogate the ethics of medical practices and their complicity in upholding systems of power.

In the novel, the subjected body emerges not only as a site of biopolitical control but also as a potential locus for revolutionary transformation. Vourvoulias portrays acts of coalition and grassroots resistance, offering readers a vision of alternative modes of political defiance. For instance, citizens conceal tattooed immigrants in their attics to shield them from the "civil patrols," evoking historical parallels to resistance movements such as those protecting refugees during wartime. Similarly, the "FedEx Brigade" protests at Hastings City Hall, publicly displaying images of the disappeared on placards, foregrounding the collective struggle to reclaim visibility and humanity in the face of systemic erasure. Vourvoulias's narrative challenges racialized medical discourses that seek to justify surveillance, containment, and biometric categorization of marginalized populations. *Ink* extends beyond speculative fiction to offer strategies for resistance that resonate in contemporary contexts.

The body, though exploited by oppressive regimes as a means of control, becomes a powerful tool for subversion and rebellion.

The novel critiques the ways in which racialized and minoritized bodies are historically excluded from the category of “the human,” framed as being governed by instinct and emotion rather than reason and valued only as sources of labor and profit. Science fiction, in this context, becomes a medium for interrogating the violent legacies of racialization while exploring the emancipatory potential of the body. Despite the pervasive biopolitical control in the narrative, Vourvoulias embeds hope through the depiction of a burgeoning resistance that reimagines embodiment, care, and connection in ways that transcend state-imposed limitations. She demonstrates how these forms of resistance manifest as magic—a force deeply tied to cultural knowledge, spirituality, and creative ingenuity. *Ink*’s integration of magic further complicates traditional binaries between science and fantasy, encouraging readers to question the hierarchies of knowledge that privilege certain forms of understanding as inherently superior. Magic in *Ink* is portrayed not as an esoteric or supernatural force but as a range of skills and abilities wielded by ordinary individuals. From computer hacking and chemistry to painting, journalism, and spiritual faith, these diverse talents contribute to the resistance movement, illustrating how resistance is a multifaceted endeavor. For example, the development of synthetic “instaskin” to disguise tattoos reflects Western scientific principles while simultaneously destabilizing the rigid distinction between science and magic. Vourvoulias further intertwines magic with indigenous knowledge systems through the portrayal of shape-shifting *nahuales*⁵—spiritual protectors that guide the protagonists. These *nahuales* underscore the novel’s theme that revolution must take place on multiple levels: physical, emotional, and imaginative. Their belief that actions in one realm influence all others encapsulates the interconnectedness of resistance, challenging readers to see imagination and creativity as forms of political agency.

Ultimately, Vourvoulias’s portrayal of the body as a site of revolutionary potential encompasses not only physical strength but also mental, emotional, and spiritual resilience. The novel urges readers to recognize that transformative struggles for justice demand holistic approaches, combining the power of reason, emotion, and cultural

5 In Mexican culture, the concept of *nagual* (or *nahual*) refers to the belief in a spiritual connection between humans and animals, often associated with the ability of certain individuals, especially sorcerers or shamans, to shape-shift into animals. For more insight, see the article on *Nagual* at Encyclopedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/nagual>.

heritage to envision and enact a more equitable world. By collapsing the boundaries between magic and science, Vourvoulias critiques epistemic hierarchies and advocates for pluralistic ways of knowing—ways that are vital to confronting and dismantling oppressive systems.

Demophobia, or the fear of demographic change, is a persistent phenomenon that transcends historical and cultural boundaries, rooted in the anxieties surrounding shifts in social hierarchies and the redefinition of power dynamics. Speculative fiction serves as a critical lens through which these anxieties can be examined, offering a space to interrogate their origins and evolution. By blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination, speculative narratives illuminate how societal fears manifest in policy, culture, and collective memory. This is particularly evident in *Ink*, where Vourvoulias foregrounds the dystopian implications of demographic fears and technological surveillance.

Reflecting on the reception of her novel, Vourvoulias noted that when *Ink* was first published in 2012, some readers found its premise implausible, remarking that the dystopia she envisioned seemed far-fetched for the United States. However, by the time of its 2018 republication, the narrative’s resonance with real-world events had grown markedly. As Vourvoulias observed, “countless messages from readers pointed to real-life concordances” (*The Guardian*), illustrating how speculative fiction can defamiliarize the present and urge readers to reexamine issues with fresh urgency.

The novel’s depiction of biometric tattoos and internment centers evokes historical practices of racial subjugation, such as the branding of enslaved individuals or the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Similarly, its portrayal of the erosion of constitutional rights—where even “assimilated Inks” are stripped of their protections—mirrors contemporary patterns of marginalization. What once may have seemed speculative now appears disturbingly plausible, particularly in light of revelations that corporations like Amazon and Palantir have collaborated with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE),⁶ providing the technological infrastructure for tracking and deporting individu-

6 For a deeper understanding of the collaboration between Amazon, Palantir, and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), refer to the article from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s *Technology Review*. The piece, titled “Amazon Is the Invisible Backbone Behind ICE’s Immigration Crackdown,” examines how these companies have facilitated ICE’s immigration enforcement practices. It sheds light on the role of technology companies in shaping contemporary immigration policies and their ethical implications. For further details, see the full article here: www.technologyreview.com/2018/10/22/139639/amazon-is-the-invisible-backbone-behind-ices-immigration-crackdown/.

als. The scenes in *Ink* depicting mass raids, deportations, and children restrained in detention centers echo chillingly similar real-world events.

While these elements feel ripped from today's headlines, it is worth noting that *Ink* was published before Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Trump's overtly xenophobic rhetoric and policies, including the 2017 travel ban (Executive Order 13769) and efforts to dismantle asylum protections for Central American migrants, intensified the visibility of anti-immigrant sentiment. However, as Vourvoulias herself remarked in *The Guardian*: "Where we stand now—poised on the precipice of a real-life immigration dystopia—cannot be laid entirely at US President Donald Trump's feet. Former US presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton all helped escalate the criminalization of undocumented immigrants in the US—but it is Trump's unabashed ill will against immigrants that might finally drive us over the edge." During Obama's presidency, immigration policies also reflected troubling patterns of enforcement, with 1.5 million deportations recorded during his first term, surpassing the deportation records of George W. Bush's two terms. By the end of Obama's tenure, the total number had reached 3 million, highlighting the bipartisan complicity in creating a system that criminalizes undocumented immigrants.⁷ Vourvoulias's critique thus transcends partisan lines, offering a broader indictment of US immigration policies and their long-standing racialized underpinnings.

Although *Ink* might be categorized as supernatural dystopian fiction, the narrative increasingly feels less futuristic and more hyperreal when read in 2024. Its speculative elements now resonate as urgent commentaries on current and historical realities. As Vourvoulias observed, "My dystopian immigration novel is not as far-fetched anymore" (*The Guardian*), a sentiment that underscores the genre's ability to hold a mirror to society, revealing uncomfortable truths about its trajectory. Through its exploration of demographobia, surveillance, and systemic oppression, *Ink* challenges readers to confront the precarity of human rights and the consequences of societal desensitization to injustice. It is a call to vigilance, reminding us that what may appear speculative today could easily become reality tomorrow.

7 The data referenced are drawn from Eric Garcia, "Biden Is Playing the Obama Game on Immigration Now," *The Independent*, 18 June 2024, and Sarah Pierce, "Obama's Record on Deportations: Deporter-in-Chief or Not?" *Migration Policy Institute*, 26 January 2017. For further details and additional information, consult the articles available at the following links: www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-deportation-numbers-obama-biden-b2649257.html and www.migrationpolicy.org/article/obama-record-deportations-deporter-chief-or-not.

Abstract: This paper examines Sabrina Vourvoulias' *Ink* (2012), a Latinofuturist dystopian novel that explores the intersection of migration, race, and systemic oppression within a near-future authoritarian United States. Drawing on the long-standing tradition of migration as a central theme in speculative fiction, *Ink* presents a society where immigration control is enforced through a highly intrusive and dehumanizing system. In the novel, migrants are permanently marked with tattoos that signify their legal status, transforming them into visible "others" whose rights and freedoms are stripped away through a series of biopolitical measures. The narrative follows the experiences of individuals whose bodies become sites of control and exploitation, as the government uses the rhetoric of disease and public safety to justify the further marginalization and sterilization of non-white migrants. This study situates *Ink* within broader conversations about migration, xenophobia, and biopolitics in contemporary US society, highlighting how the novel critiques current immigration policies and the racialized processes of exclusion. The paper also explores how Vourvoulias uses speculative elements—such as the fictional tattooing process and the creation of spaces like the "Inkatorium"—to address the lived realities of Latinx migrants and their experiences of alienation. By combining elements of dystopian fiction with real-world political dynamics, *Ink* offers a powerful commentary on the fragility of belonging in a society marked by hostility toward immigrants. Ultimately, this paper argues that *Ink* serves as a crucial intervention into the speculative fiction genre, one that forces readers to confront the dystopian dimensions of Latinx migration in the US. It challenges the boundaries between hospitality and hostility, offering a compelling vision of resistance and survival within an increasingly hostile, racialized system.

Keywords: diaspora, race, dystopia, Latinx, chicanafuturism, *Ink*, speculative fiction

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APORIAS OF BELONGING IN SANDRA UWIRINGIYIMANA'S *HOW DARE THE SUN RISE.* *MEMOIRS OF A WAR CHILD* (2017)

*the first condition of humanity is exile,
thus we are forced to engage with one another*
(Dufourmantelle 14)

Hospitality is built into the very fabric of who we are
(Kearney and Fitzpatrick 10)

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The aim of this paper is to showcase the aporias at the heart of what it means to belong for stateless survivors of war and genocide; that is, for the people who were denied citizenship in their countries of birth and their countries of origin, who were brutally uprooted and forced into exile. Drawing in detail on Jacques Derrida's development of the concept of hospitality, this study analyses Sandra Uwiringiyimana's personal account of survival in her memoir, *How Dare the Sun Rise. Memoirs of a War Child* (2017). In this analysis, the formidable, if not irresolvable, aspects of belonging emerge as deeply entangled with the aporia at the heart of hospitality itself. As Derrida noticed, this aporia entails paradoxes of inclusion and exclusion, where the ethical imperative to welcome the other confronts the structural limitations of historical violence, national borders, and legal status. Consequently, the aporias of belonging for Sandra Uwiringiyimana emerge from and are manifested in numerous instances of the daily experienced contradiction: her human need to belong is perpetually frustrated, since while it is proclaimed a universal right, the national legal frameworks constantly deny it. The aporias of belonging entail all the insurmountable situations on the broad spectrum from marginalization to dehumanization that she and her family were thrown into and managed to survive, as well as all the losses (i.e., of family members, of belongings, of any stability and sense of self) on their way to the ultimately won recognition as rightful citizens of a nation state.

In narrating the lived reality of exiles and refugees, her memoir poignantly points to the broader political paradoxes of modern citizenship. Moreover, Uwiringiyimana's memoir indicates the invaluable potential of hospitality—as Derrida, Paul Ricoeur, and also Melissa Fitzpatrick and Richard Kearney explicate it—that is, hospitality as a human condition, linguistic hospitality, narrative hospitality, and hospitality as a narrative gift, all of which can guide and inform our interactions with others on personal, societal, cultural, and national levels.

1. HOSPITALITY AS A HUMAN CONDITION

The question of hospitality is fundamentally an ethical question that arises in an encounter between the self and the other within a given space. In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Jacques Derrida writes that when we talk about hospitality, we, in fact, talk about “ethicity itself, the whole and the principle of ethics” (50). Currently, in cultural, political, and sociological discourses, the interest in the practices of hospitality emerges in intense discussions about immigrant policies. In these disputes, the other is the migrant: a stranger classified in accordance with the degree of their foreignness. Their otherness is regarded as either a promise of alliance and contribution, or a threat of conflict, maybe even a risk of annihilation. In “Linguistic Hospitality. The Risk of Translation,” Richard Kearney observes that this latter approach, that is, the negative and unwelcoming stance, appears to have become a prevailing reaction especially when the extent of unfamiliarity of the migrant is not easily reducible, when the foreigner defies a ready treatment as another self (22–23). When the host cannot see enough of themselves in the migrant to recognize their common humanity, their strangeness is experienced as a threat to the host's integrity. Thus, the host may refuse to treat the newcomer as a guest to whom they would otherwise extend all the regular gestures of welcome. Instead, the stranger is approached with fear as a dangerous trespasser, a violator of boundaries. Bearing this in mind, the question of hospitality is probably best approached, in the words of Dan Bulley, as a question of the way(s) of conduct—“the primary way in which ‘we’ practice everyday relations with difference” (*Migration* 4). Hospitality entails the ways we comprehend our sense of identity and integrity, whether as individuals, communities, and/or nations; it is concerned with how we manage our disposition when faced with the unfamiliar, and how we negotiate our understanding of boundaries, ownership, and belonging.

Hospitality as a way of conduct—as a verb rather than as a noun—Derrida acknowledges to emerge from a fundamental cleavage, that is, the aporia that results from the inherent incompatibility, yet mutual dependency between the unconditional and the conditional hospitality. The unconditional hospitality Derrida defines as

absolute hospitality [which] requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner [...], but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity or even their names. (*Hospitality* 25)

Unconditional hospitality cannot be reduced to laws and rights: it remains in the realm of ideals and opens towards the arrival of the absolute other. It seems akin to Franz Kafka's Law, as opposed to laws that correspond to conditional hospitality, which include particular regulations, demands, and expectations. Unconditional hospitality and conditional hospitality are irreducible to one another, yet are interdependent; they exist in endless loops of implications and delineations. Unconditional hospitality opens up the possibility to practice hospitality by way of the conditions through which it realizes itself

even while keeping itself above the law of hospitality, *the* unconditional law of hospitality needs the laws, it requires them. This demand is constitutive. It wouldn't be effectively unconditional, the law, if it didn't have to become effective, concrete, determined. (*Hospitality* 79)

Unconditional hospitality is operative only when realized through applicable rules, since the encounter between the self and the other, the host and the guest, is not relegated to an ideal realm, but always takes place in a particular space. Bulley calls hospitality "*a spatial relational practice with affective dimensions*" (*Migration* 7). Hospitality produces space: organizes, limits, and frees space as it requires crossing boundaries and thresholds as well as the demarcation between an inside and an outside (26–30). Hospitality is about known and familiar space, about space as home, or by extension, the state as home. A host can welcome the guest only when s/he owns a home and exerts a certain power over it: when s/he is the master of their own house (Derrida, *Hospitality* 51–53).

This fear of welcoming the stranger stems from the fluidity of roles between host and guest, which are ultimately not fixed. As Derrida explains, "Anyone who encroaches on my 'at home,' on my ipseity,

on my sovereignty as a host, I start to regard as an undesirable foreigner and virtually an enemy[...] I become their hostage” (*Hospitality* 53). Hospitality and hostility not only share a linguistic root but also a conceptual horizon, as both underlie the polar dynamics of the reaction to the other: either welcoming and taking the other in or excluding and casting the other out. Herein also lie the origins of Derrida’s concept of *hostipitality* that, as Kearney encapsulates it, combines the two: “the constant wagering between hostility and hospitality, between vigilance and welcome” (“Linguistic Hospitality” 21). While the other stands at the door, the host is at the decision threshold. Whether what separates the self from the other will prove to be a gateway or a barrier to communication and community is determined anew in each such confrontation.

2. THE BANYAMULENGE AND THE PERILS OF NONBELONGING

The complexity and hybridity of hospitality—its intrinsic entanglement with the variegated, sometimes even contradictory, aspects of space, power, generosity, responsibility, and enmity—offer a crucial approach to reading Sandra Uwiringiyimana’s life story in *How Dare the Sun Rise. Memoirs of a War Child* (2017). Her memoir evidences the lived blessings and pitfalls of hospitality in a dire context. Uwiringiyimana writes as a member of the minority Banyamulenge tribe, which is known to inhabit the High Plateau in South Kivu, one of the country’s twenty-five provinces¹ in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

As René Lemarchand writes, the Banyamulenge, who are “a culturally distinct group of Tutsi [...] migrated into the Congo from Rwanda in pre-colonial times” (xvi). Lemarchand clarifies that the label Banyamulenge “has been used by self-styled ‘authentic’ Congolese to stigmatize as foreigners all Tutsi elements residing in the Congo” (xvi). They are viewed as strangers, foreigners, and are not recognized as Congolese (Ntanyoma). Moreover, most Banyamulenge are cattle keepers, which further defines them as “enemy aliens” (Lemarchand 46). Beyond their appearance and lifestyle, their language sets them apart. Kinyamulenge is a blend of Kinyarwanda, the language of Rwanda, and Kirundi, the language of Burundi, often referred to as the twin country of Rwanda (Takeuchi 40–65). In the DRC, they are considered Rwandan or Burundian, as the Tutsi form a significant percentage

1 25 or 26 provinces, if the capital, Kinshasa that has the status of a province, is also included.

of the indigenous population. In contrast, in Rwanda and Burundi, the Banyamulenge are labeled as Congolese, in accordance with their country of birth.

The Banyamulenge community's population, estimated at 400,000 people, has been under heavy siege that intensified since 2017 and has been described as amounting to a genocide (Ntanyoma). Despite having lived in South Kivu for generations, long enough to claim native status, the recent reports highlight the persistent hostility toward the Banyamulenge in the DRC. It does not help that the DRC government dismisses "claims that the community is facing targeted attacks as fiction," and that local officials and militia are also violent towards the Banyamulenge (Ntanyoma). The repeated and coordinated hostilities, such as cattle theft, destruction of homes and villages, hate speech, and denial of citizenship, intensified during major attacks targeting the elimination of the ethnic group in 1996, 1998, and 2004, all of which unfolded in the aftermath of the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda. Many had to flee their homes and became internally displaced persons, relocated to refugee camps. Uwiringiyimana's memoir opens onto the gory events that occurred in one of them, the Gatumba refugee camp, situated on the border in Burundi.

On August 13, 2004, in a brutal massacre, the then ten-year-old Uwiringiyimana lost her younger sister, the six-year-old Deborah, while other members of her family were heavily wounded. The survivors, stateless and deeply traumatized, were relegated to another refugee camp in Burundi and subsequently transported to Rwanda. As non-citizens, unwanted and unrecognizable by the political apparatus, the Banyamulenge are perceived as people who are treated as—relying on the phrase used by Zygmunt Bauman—"the superfluous in the globalized world" (Kohlenberger 36). Without the necessary documentation—the stateless people are the undocumented—it was only through an opportunity presented by the UN Refugee Program that the promise of a potential home destination emerged. The UN enables endangered individuals to resettle, among others, to the United States under certain conditions, that is, if they have been permanently displaced from their home country due to persecution, war, and other life-threatening situations. Uwiringiyimana's family, after a couple of years of documentation filling and cross-questioning, eventually landed in Rochester, NY, in 2007.

Born in South Kivu on June 22, 1994, the 77th day of the Rwanda Genocide, a bloody massacre that deeply scarred the nation as well as the neighboring countries, Sandra Uwiringiyimana entered the world in a state of war. Her life, shaped by unimaginable violence, repeated

displacements, and poignant fault lines, is encapsulated in her memoir. The genre enables her to weave together varied narrative forms, and thus it is all of them: a grief narrative, a (family) survival story, a coming-of-age account, a confession, a witness's testimony, and a narrative of resilience. These personal dimensions collectively transform the memoir into a political act, as its publication places her story within the contested public arena of historical representation. Thus, Uwiringiyimana contributes not only her individual perspective but also serves as a voice for the often-ignored and silenced Banyamulenge.

3. THE EXILE'S CONDITION

The memoir, written in a direct manner as the author relies on concise and straightforward sentences, charts Uwiringiyimana's trajectory from the postcolonial—yet not fully decolonized—Global South to the relatively liberal-democratic Global North. It is a traumatic route of an Internally Displaced Person turned stateless refugee to a recognized and documented citizen of the USA. Only the last journey, across the pond, is a willed endeavor, or perhaps rather a last resort attempt to save life. The previous displacements in central Africa are forced and hostile casting-outs into the confined space of the refugee camp(s). Camps work by care and control; they are, as Bulley defines them, “literally spaces crafted to offer hospitality to those that need it most” (*Migration* 72). Their function is to save lives by providing basic provisions: shelter, food, clothes, warmth, and safety. Uwiringiyimana's reality, like that of most IDPs, is that what begins as a temporary arrangement that saves life often evolves into indefinite, unhomely detainment limbo that resembles a prison, and as such is marked by insecurity, vulnerability, and insufficiency (*Relational Ethics* 91–97). More than that, her experience lays bare that assembled in one place, the IDPs are an easy target for extremists who seek their extermination. The physical and mental confinement, augmented by the constant fear, prevents growth. What Uwiringiyimana repeatedly emphasizes is that the camps are a hostile space and, like quicksand, they pull one into their orbit, leaving little space to maneuver or even to think of maneuvering in the first place.

Uwiringiyimana's family's resettlement to the United States is not a regular order of things. As Alex Balch notices, “There is an asymmetry between the right to leave and the right to enter states” (40), and Uwiringiyimana's life narrative shows it is easy to disown people, to deny them citizenship, and their rights, whereas it verges on a serendipitous alignment of circumstances whether they will ever be able to gain these anew. Displaced people and refugees end up believing

citizenship is like a gift extended to them by powerful masters, hosts of a given space, instead of their right to belong. As Balch writes, there is no universally, cross-nationally recognized human right to immigrate, “there is no such principle included in any of the constitutions of receiving countries,” nor is there any automatic systemic order of recognition of lawful belonging (40).

What is more, in recent years, states have made it as difficult as possible for unwanted newcomers to enter and created a hostile environment to deter potential migrants. The motivation behind the politics of deterrence is that once a person finds themselves on the territory of a given state (at least in the Global North), they are not supposed to be denied the same rights as those cherished by its citizens (Balch 42). The hostility towards the newcomers may stem as much from their otherness as from concerns about resources—that there will not be enough to go around.² Adding to this the fear-mongering, scapegoating, topped with deliberate ambiguity, amplified by the media, the *xenia* or *xenos* (i.e., guest, stranger) are hastily closed the door at.

Hostile experiences and severe deprivations are part of Uwiringiyimana’s memoir. Fleeing South Kivu meant losing family members, abandoning the family’s yellow house, and leaving behind all their possessions, including photo albums—the only remaining proof of and connection to their meaningful past. For a time during their exile, these albums served as fading remnants of their world before the calamity, reaffirming their shared humanity and connection to one another and to what was lost. Most crucially, the family lost their (human) rights: they were denied the right to self-agency, unhampered movement, work, and the right to take any action. In the camp, Uwiringiyimana feels alienated and useless, as there is nothing meaningful to do. She is never to complain, though. Her mother differentiates between trauma in its original meaning, that is, between a wound inflicted on the body, and the psychological trauma. The latter is deemed inferior, insufficient to induce valid consequences: “Did they injure you in some way? [...] Do you have a wound?” (47). Faced with death and heavy injuries to their family and friends, these questions might be the mother’s last resort at preventing the surge of despair in her daughter. However, the call to suppress trauma makes the girl feel alienated from

2 As Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick write, hospitality presupposes a gift economy: “a shared culture of reciprocity serving the common good, understood as common health, wealth, nourishment, education, and justice [...] the hospitality ethics argues there is always enough for everyone—if properly distributed” (8). Thus, the question of sufficiency arises as a potential regulatory measure in the tension between scarcity and sufficiency.

her parents and disconnected from herself. Uwiringiyimana's memoir finally answers "yes" to these questions as she confronts her wounds within the reflective space of narrative invention.

4. LINGUISTIC HOSPITALITY

Jacques Derrida asserts that "displaced persons,' exiles, those who are deported, expelled, rootless, nomads, all share two sources of sighs (two nostalgias): their dead ones and their language" (*Hospitality* 87). When it comes to language, Derrida continues, the foreigner needs to "ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host. . . . This personage imposes on him translation into their own language, and that's the first act of violence" (15). All of us are asked for our name and personal data at borders, as identification is often verified through documentation. The answer to the question 'who are you?' is the first demand placed on people who enter someone else's home, and when they enter a different state. The question of the name is not without its complications for Uwiringiyimana, who explains:

In our tribe, parents give their kids both a first and a last name—family members don't share a last name. [...] Parents typically choose names with a goal of helping to shape their children's character. I was named after a Rwandan Prime Minister, Agathe Uwiringiyimana. [...] I love that my parents named me after her. It makes me feel like I have big shoes to fill, and that someday I can do something worth being remembered for. (19)

Agathe Uwiringiyimana,³ the Rwandan Prime Minister, together with the President of Rwanda Juvénal Habyarimana, both of Hutu origin, were for the implementation of Arusha Accords, that is, the Peace Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Rwanda and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) to end the Civil War in Rwanda that broke out in 1990. Habyarimana's plane was shot down as it was lowering to land in Kigali on April 6, 1994. Agathe Uwiringiyimana, her husband, and ten Belgian peacekeepers who protected their home were brutally murdered by the Presidential guard on the morning of the next day. To give a Banyamulenge daughter, born two months after the tragic death of her namesake, a second name that belonged to a Hutu official may be interpreted as an act of acknowledgement of the personal courage and resilience of the first woman Prime Minister and acting President in the emergency of Rwanda. The par-

3 Also spelled as Uwilingiyimana.

ents' gesture extends beyond the Hutu–Tutsi divide and may be seen as an expression of a wish for peace in Rwanda and its neighboring states, which are also implicated in the conflict.

Before the family can move to safety across the ocean, Uwiringiyimana needs documents filled out in English. To be granted certificates of permission, she must first translate herself into a story that will match up with the accounts of her parents and siblings. It is overwhelmingly stressful for her since she must recall extreme atrocities and her perished relatives. Moreover, just as her family members do not share a common surname and may not be immediately recognized as a unit in the Global North, she is afraid

that if my answers didn't match up precisely with those of my family, we would not get to go to America [...] people don't always recall the same details from traumatic situations. I had noticed this from the members of my own family: We were in the same massacre, but we sometimes had different recollections. (109)

The precocity of the girl who recognizes the demands on her story adds a burden to an already precarious predicament. In practice, as the potential newcomer, she and her family are both individually and collectively tested on their skills, background, health, current political status, and on their general stamina to endure the intricate and lengthy scrutiny process, often compounded by the indifference and lack of empathy from officials during the frequent screenings. The proffered narration of a common survival story, corroborated by established data, is how entrance into the host territory is granted, combined with the negative test results for HIV and tuberculosis.

Just as she mastered Swahili and French before, upon arriving in the USA, the 13-year-old Sandra quickly masters English both in comprehension and communication. She is soon translating for her parents, from regular bills to crucial documents—which she is fluent in, but which somewhat alienates her from her role as a daughter. It is just one of the instances of parentification she is thrown into in the United States. Uwiringiyimana becomes the family's translator. To use the words of Paul Ricœur, she became the “flesh and blood mediator” (“Reflections” 5) between different linguistic systems, the onus on whom is the double duty of linguistic hospitality as Kearney defines it: “to remain faithful to one's own language and to welcome the foreigner's language at the same time” (“Linguistic Hospitality” 17). Ricœur defines linguistic hospitality as “the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other

into one's own home, one's own dwelling" (*On Translation* xvi). In Uwiringiyimana's case, this presents a dire challenge, since the space where she is supposed to practice linguistic hospitality is not truly hers; it is as new to her as the language she needs to welcome in order to survive. The only space she used to call home was the yellow house, and even that first family home was situated on the ground that never welcomed her. In fact, she never had a space to truly and fully call her own and one that would claim her as her own in return.

Already, as the family applied for entry to the USA, they were obliged to respond in the future host's terms. Often, the immigrant, as a guest, is demanded to fit their self into a shape recognizable by the host. As Kearney writes:

We naturally read every stranger with respect to our lifeworld of cultural horizons. As soon as I, *qua* host, ask, "Who are you?" my guest is obliged to respond in my terms. All hermeneutics in practice is a mixed act of "hostipitality" welcoming the other at the same time as one translates its alterity into someone "like me": a self I can recognize and identify. ("Linguistic Hospitality" 21)

What it means in practice is that in order to facilitate the flow of communication and recognition, as Ricœur emphasizes it in *On Translation*, there is always loss involved in the process of translation: the loss of meaning, the loss of self, and even loss of facts, as in the case with Uwiringiyimana's birthdate. The date now officially stands as June 1, 1994, instead of the correct June 22, 1994. Her mother, overwhelmed with anxiety, was too distressed to challenge the officials as they mistakenly recorded the date in the documents. The *hostipitality* experienced in the act of translation—both into the language of the other and into predetermined narrative structures—results from the general resistance to allow the other to come in their otherness as well as in the fundamental unintelligibility of this otherness prior to reducing it to what is familiar. Uwiringiyimana displays an uncanny ability to deal with loss and strives to make herself at home both in the English language and in the city of Rochester.

5. NARRATIVE HOSPITALITY

Still, at school, her language skills are of little value. The situation repeats itself: just as back in the DRC and Rwanda, her way of speaking is unwelcome again. It makes her conspicuous as a foreigner and in an awkward way:

I was quickly learning that I was not considered African American, even though I was from Africa and I was living in America. My words came out sounding different from theirs. In fact, as I began to learn and speak more English, the African American kids started accusing me of sounding “white.” (151)

The misunderstanding results from the fact that translation does not occur solely on the level of words, but also involves the cultural transfer of meanings and values. Just like the American idea of beauty, the American idea of fun (the reader may imagine that camping was not exactly a preferred activity of hers), and the unruly behavior of kids at school, while she considered education a privilege, the concept of racism in the USA is a novelty to her:

I didn’t understand the difference between black and white. Growing up in Congo, being black was not an issue for me. My skin color was something I never thought about. I didn’t understand why sounding “white” would be considered bad among black kids, or even what it meant to sound white. No one was teaching me [...] the right way. And I wondered what the “right” way was. (152)

The particulars of her predicament are new, yet the underlying mechanics of racism is familiar, as it is similar to the one that underpins the violence directed toward the Banyamulenge back in the DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda. Among other things, it was sparked by their unusual way of speaking. In what we may call the contemporary era of both/and, her reality was that of neither/nor: neither Congolese, nor Rwandan; neither white, nor black enough, but again a villain and a scapegoat for what is wrong in yet another country. As before, Uwiringiyimana finds it difficult to navigate the norms and values:

I was not well versed in American history, but I had learned the basics in school in Africa. I knew things like names of presidents and states. I knew that slavery had happened, but I didn’t know all the details [...]. It wasn’t part of my story. (163)

The non-recognition is mutual—her classmates had known nothing about her story, and so they projected onto her the available cultural categories and stereotypes that were accessible to them. A shift in understanding comes with the class screening of *Hotel Rwanda*. The film translates the Genocide in Rwanda into American visual language, with all the pros and cons that come with such a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic adaptation. Even though this 2004 Hollywoodized African *Schindler’s List* came into its share of fair criticism and the screening caused teenage Sandra considerable stress, it did foster a change in the classroom.

Whereas translation is linguistic hospitality, narrative hospitality, as Ricœur writes, “is a matter of exchanging memories at the narrative level where they are presented for comprehension” (“Reflections” 7). The teacher who arranged the screening of the movie extended a gesture of welcome that enabled the emergence of what Dan Bulley calls “*particular* responsibilities [...] generated through interaction, interdependence, and connection” (*Relational Ethics* 8–9). By introducing the students to the brutal conflict, the teacher involved them in—as Ricœur calls it—a practice of narrative hospitality, which means “taking responsibility, in imagination and in sympathy, for the story of the other, through the life narratives that concern that other” (“Reflections” 6). *Hotel Rwanda* becomes an intermediary between Uwiringiyimana and her classmates. It portrays regular people thrown into the 1994 atrocities with their human reactions, emotions, and the impossible choices most were forced to make. The movie offers substantial context to her story without revealing its specific details. As such, it became a corrective among her classmates, enabling what Kearney calls “recognition of the other as someone *like* myself, who shares important things in common with me” (“Linguistic Hospitality” 23), which in turn opens up a space for empathy and dialogue. Moreover, the event seems to have unlocked a new source of potential for Uwiringiyimana, which lies in the transformative power and importance of storytelling.

She was again confronted with her past, otherwise dormant and neglected amid her daily duties, when she stood in for her older sister at a welcome talk before the performance of a church choir her father had founded. This time, the story addressed specifically the fate of the Banyamulenge and her family. It was met with care and appreciation from the public, which made her eager to share it further.⁴ Her activist endeavors brought about relief and a sense of accomplishment, but also exhaustion and anger. The more she delved into her losses, the more she realized that hatred was at the core of genocide. Her memoir sets out both to work through her own grief and to dismantle the layers of the collective hatred towards the Banyamulenge by doing justice to them as regular and hardworking people who have been violently wronged with no opportunity to seek justice.

The question of representation and reception dominates Uwiringiyimana’s personal narrative. Both the physical appearance of people (skin color, hairstyle, clothing, etc.) and the narratives and attitudes

4 As David Kessler writes, people are hard-wired with the need to have their grief witnessed (2019, 29).

that circulate about particular groups of people are under her scrutiny. In her memoir, it is perceptible that she has an obligation on her part to set the account straight. This urge to provide a space for her people's representation is also what motivated her and her brother's work on the exhibition of portraits and stories of the survivors of the Gatumba massacre. In so doing, the siblings were, to use Kearney's words, giving "a future to the past by translating deep legacies of transgenerational hurt into narrative forms of healing" ("Narrative Hospitality" 29).

6. MEMOIR AS A NARRATIVE GIFT

After language, the other sigh Derrida mentions are the dead. The persistent presence/absence—the ghost in the memoir—is the brutally killed Deborah, Sandra's four-year-younger sister. Not only does the memoir begin, but it also ends with recollections of the little girl:

This book is for her. If I could sit down with her today, this is the story I would tell her. Deborah is with me still, and always will be. Sometimes at night, I talk with her in my dreams. When I see her there, she is always six years old. (276)

Uwiringiyimana's memoir is a work of mourning. She grieves for the life that was literally and metaphorically cut short, the life that had not happened. Everyone else seems to have moved on, which only aggravates her condition and eventually leads to a severe breakdown and an extended separation from her parents and her four older siblings. Throughout the narrative, no matter what she focuses on, Uwiringiyimana always makes room for Deborah: she mentions a couple of times how she corrects her mother when she introduces Sandra as her youngest child. She recalls Deborah's little gestures, her beauty, her favorite shirt, her smile, her face—always fearful of these memories' gradual disappearance into forgetting.

Derrida writes of hospitality as a form of mourning, that is, as an act of making space for the dead (*Hospitality* 102). It corresponds to what David Kessler points out in *Finding Meaning. The Sixth Stage of Grief*—the relationship with the dead does not end but continues in a different way. Kessler considers grief to be the other side of love: it is love that can no longer attach itself to a living and present object (34). Thus, it is relegated to the realm of reminiscence, the realm of thoughts. This is one of the reasons why the memoir seems to be a genre especially attuned to hospitality: it provides a space for thought about the past, a space for thoughtful recollection of others and of oneself in relation to others. Anne Dufourmantelle

mentions the space of thinking as the space where hospitality happens: “To think is to invite, to offer a shelter to the other, within ourselves; the other as the possibility to become yourself” (13). It is the thought that creates this space of encounter, that enables it by welcoming and housing the other as one remembers them. Memoir operates by converting these thoughts into stories, and as Ali Smith writes, “The telling of stories is an act of profound hospitality. It always has been; story is an ancient form of generosity. [...] Story has always been a welcoming-in...” (“A Welcome”). Stories forge a sense of connection by way of inclusion, commemoration, care, and guidance. In the USA, Uwiringiyimana’s parents passed all the tests and became citizens of the country. By default, as their underage child, she also became a citizen of the US and received her ID, “the first thing I owned that proved I exist” (205). Hence, the family—no longer stateless and now rightfully documented—was missing one more member still in need of a space of belonging.

The other way in which memoir provides space for the dead is through the narrative tomb or literary crypt (Derrida, *Hospitality* 103). Uwiringiyimana suffers from strong survival guilt: it is bewildering to her to think that if the attack had not happened, the family might still be in a refugee camp, but that Deborah might still be alive. In her desperate calculations, her sister’s death equals the survival of the entire family. Also, she is tormented sick by the fact that Deborah has never been properly buried, never properly mourned by the family, that no one knows what happened to her body, that there is no grave to visit. To lay her sister to rest and always be able to locate her, she composes the memoir: a narrative space where the memory of Deborah’s name and her brief life can be preserved. Hence, the memoir, a memorial in language, is at once most and least mobile of all⁵: contained between the covers of a book, it still can travel across the globe. At the time of its composition, Deborah would have been 18 years old and the memoir is also a gift: it welcomes her at the would-have-been adulthood. Thus, it may be considered as a gift in its purest form—offered to the dead, it can never be reciprocated. Or, perhaps, the memoir is an attempt to pay off an unpayable debt, as Uwiringiyimana feels herself poignantly indebted to Deborah for life. Certainly, with the memoir, she created a space where her love for the perished sister finally finds accommodation.

5 See also Lindsay Anne Balfour, *Hospitality in a Time of Terror. Strangers at the Gate*, Bucknell UP, 2018.

6. CONCLUSION

[...] hospitality has never been a stable, uncontested, or purely altruistic figure. What hospitality *is* is an intricate structure of ethics, violence, promise, threat, and impossibility that has been worked through, tested, and struggled over for millennia. (Balfour xiv)

If the migrant crisis is the crisis of hospitality, as Balch diagnoses it, it “is neither transitory nor temporary—it is something intrinsic to liberal democracies or liberalism itself” (246). As Melissa Fitzpatrick argues, “If the foreigner will be destroyed upon returning to the place from which he came, it is the duty of the host to [...] not send them back to a situation that would violate their dignity” (“Hospitality Beyond Borders” 63). However, as Fitzpatrick continues, Immanuel Kant already reserved the refusal of hospitality “if the stranger *gives up* their freedom, arriving in utter hostility” (63).

Uwiringiyimana’s memoir represents the vicissitudes of stateless migrants in response to the question always posed at the borders: ‘Who are you?’ She answers in detail in the form of a story and in so doing inscribes her reply into—what Ricoeur implies is—a global exchange of stories of suffering (“Reflections”). She writes because there was no trial and no one was held accountable for the Gatumba massacre. The collective suffering of the Banyamulenge was silenced, as was her own trauma, further augmented by a post-genocide sexual misconduct by a family acquaintance. Moreover, the general image of her people, she believes, is either unfamiliar or distorted. With the memoir, she both testifies to and documents the lives of the perished, the survivors, and their suffering that came from both strangers and kin alike. Addressing the hurt paradoxically both pains and empowers Uwiringiyimana as she owns her experience and endows it with a form. With the memoir she responds to the chronic question with: “I’m a human being. What are you?” (208).

To make their stories a visible part of the literary scene, the memoirist has to vie for the attention of the public. Uwiringiyimana has done this work—her exhibition of Banyamulenge portraits and stories garnered cordial responses and connected her with prominent people: Michelle Obama, Samantha Power, Angelina Jolie, Oprah, and others. Just like her class during the screening of *Hotel Rwanda*, the audiences were attentive. However, there is acute vulnerability involved in writing and publishing a memoir. The risk is that memoirs—consumed by people safely distant in their homes—will commodify the stories of survivors, that the hostile consumption and misappropriation

of the other will overshadow the values of hospitality and respect towards them. The gain is that the memoirist's truth is communicated and witnessed, even across large distances, in the hope that the reader will know how to be a guest invited to the space of the other's story.

Hope in storytelling's power to evoke emotions, recognition, reciprocity, and a sense of belonging endures, since it allows for imaginative overcoming of differences. One could go a step further and say that in the very act of reading the functions of the host and the guest enter into a state of chiasmic exchange: the memoirist is the host of their story and at the same a guest in the thoughts of the reader, whereas the reader is an invited guest to the story of the memoirist simultaneously providing their own space of thought for their story to unfold, to use the words of Fitzpatrick, to "host them and their unique perspective, listen, and learn" ("Impossible Hospitality" 87). Thus, the memoir, as a result of embodied storytelling, facilitates narrative hospitality, which may not resolve but temporarily suspend the aporia at the core of hospitality itself, creating space for the search for practical, if provisional, solutions to its crisis.

Abstract: This paper discusses the memoir *How Dare the Sun Rise: Memoirs of a War Child* (2017) by Sandra Uwiringiyimana, exploring it in the context of hospitality as both ethics *per se* and as an underlying principle of the human condition. Hospitality is considered what governs interactions between people and helps to understand how we approach our sense of identity and integrity when faced with the unfamiliar. Referring to the texts of Jacques Derrida (conditional and unconditional hospitality, the work of grief), the works of Paul Ricœur (linguistic and narrative hospitality), Richard Kearney, Melissa Fitzpatrick, and others, Uwiringiyimana's memoir is discussed as a testimonial account and a narrative document of a member of an ethnic minority of the Banyamulenge from South Kivu, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As a girl, she becomes a stateless Internally Displaced Person who manages to migrate to the United States, where she is finally granted citizenship. Fraught with trauma and grief, but also hope and resilience, the memoir is shown to provide a unique space to record, evaluate, and foster acts of hospitality that undocumented refugees and migrants experience. In these reports, hospitality emerges as intricately intertwined with hostility; whether the one or the other will prevail is a matter determined anew in each confrontation between the self and the other. The implications of such a recognition of hospitality for both authors and readers of the memoir are also considered, alongside the memoir's value as a genre of a distinct form and function.

Keywords: hospitality, memoir, IDP, migration, citizenship, Banyamulenge

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HOSPITALITY IN THE REINTEGRATION PROCESS OF EX-FARC COMBATANTS IN THE GRAPHIC NOVEL *EN EL OMBLIGO*

by Gala Rocabert Navarro and Anna-Lina Mattar

INTRODUCTION

The recent US election results, alongside the broader ultra-right shift in Europe and other parts of the globe, reflect a collision of fears and insecurities generated by complex injustices. Radical conservative populism capitalizes on these dynamics, as suggested by scholars across disciplines, such as Beck, Massumi, Wodak, or Ley and Ssorin-Chaikov.¹ Normalized and silenced through its normalization, as Stuart Hall (153–155) elaborates, systemic violence and injustice generate distrust and erode social fabric. In this global atmosphere of fragmentation, it is crucial to explore narratives that seek to repair social bonds and foster peaceful coexistence. Hospitality challenges exclusionary politics and offers a means of rebuilding trust and solidarity in fractured communities. This article focuses on the concept of hospitality as an ethical principle of social cohesion. It explores the practices of hospitality in the conflict-torn community, where violence is recognized and, at least partially, worked through. We analyze the graphic novel *En el ombligo* by Catalan authors Gala Rocabert Navarro and Anna-Lina Mattar, which discusses the process of reintegration of the ex-combatants of the Colombian left-wing self-defense guerrilla

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1 For further discussion on the topic see: Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. Translated by Mark Ritter, SAGE Publications, 1992; Massumi, Brian, editor. *Politics Of Everyday Fear*. University of MP, 1993; Wodak, Ruth. *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. SAGE Publications, 2015; Ley, Lukas, and Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov. Editorial. *Social Anthropology*, Volume 29, Issue 2, 2021, pp. 281–282.

group FARC-EP² into social, economic, and political processes, soon after the Peace Agreement signed with the Colombian Government in 2016. We examine how the graphic novel engages with the theme of hospitality throughout its narrative within the broader context of current public and scholarly debates regarding the peace process in Colombia.

The article is structured as follows: first, we define the key concepts that inform our framework, such as hospitality and the text-image relations; we then briefly describe the context of the ongoing Colombian armed conflict, peace accord, and reintegration process; finally, we proceed to the graphic novel in question, in which we analyze the role of hospitality in fostering social cohesion.

HOSPITALITY

Hospitality is commonly understood as the individual or collective ability, effort, and infrastructure to welcome a stranger. The etymology of the word, as noted by the *Online Etymology Dictionary* (Harper), indicates the importance of guest-host relations for the ancient Indo-European societies and the bond of trust that comes with it. Deeply embedded in the power dynamics of social organization, this makes hospitality an ethical marker as it reveals the relations with the Other in society.

Both Jacques Derrida (*Of Hospitality* 147–149) and Emmanuel Levinas,³ renowned philosophers of hospitality, distinguish between institutionalized hospitality and an ideal form that could be practiced by some individuals or groups. Institutionalized hospitality is conditional. Bida (22–45), Guia and Jamal (3–4), Kumar (80–103), Robert (153–167), Shapiro (110–131), and Weber (1–17), among other scholars, expand on Derrida’s argument that seeing the guest exclusively as the Other implies denying them the right to be themselves. Such hospitality demands the guest to give in their otherness in favor of the homogenized and standardized imagery of the host. Derrida calls this act of hosting *hostipitality* as it inherently contains an element of violence and hostility (“Hostipitality” 16). The homogenized and imagined Otherness is seen as a nuisance rather than a source of new experience, knowledge, and self-growth. Denying the Other their rights to be the Other, hostipitality turns hostile to the hosts

2 The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (Spanish: *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*, FARC–EP)

3 See: Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. Duquesne UP, 1969.

themselves as it denies the Other in themselves and eliminates the possibility of becoming something else.

The unconditional hospitality that would embrace the Otherness is desirable for both Levinas and Derrida, but hardly achievable. Expanding on this, Guia and Jamal (7–8) propose to explore hospitality through the lenses of Deleuze’s philosophy of difference,⁴ and Deleuze and Guattari’s nomad thought (x), and advocate for ongoing mutual transformation that dissolves the binary opposition between a host and a guest. From this perspective, hospitality becomes a context-specific event informed by affect—a recognized ability to affect and be affected. It recognizes the guest as an agent and affirms their right to be the Other through acknowledging the inevitable mutual becoming in the event of encountering the Other. In such an encounter, “the ethical responsibility becomes a (situated) response-ability” (Guia and Jamal 8),⁵ which enables mutual potential change. This ethics is not binding, universal, or presubjective but radically situated, as it calls for a recognition of reality’s complexity and an action informed by this recognition.

Based on such ethics, hospitality is a willingness to learn from each encounter with diverse and multiple Others, and a desire to welcome such encounters altogether. This is a practical proposal which echoes the principle of social sustainability of *nunca más*, the discourse of non-repetition of violence leading the peace process in Colombia. It addresses structural and systemic violence by de-normalizing violence as a foundational value of the state institutions. Restoring trust, as Larsen claims (6–7), is crucial for overcoming the risks and mending social cohesion.

The position of situated ethics of becoming invites the understanding of social cohesion as a community of responsibility, a community of feeling, as solidarity. For Zoë Heyn-Jones and Celeste Mayorga Urbina, hospitality—solidarity is not a choice but culture itself. Drawing on Derrida’s conceptual proposal of unconditional solidarity, they insist that hospitality is always “enacted, embodied, performed” (40). Hospitality, then, is not a law, a thought, but an act, an everyday

4 See: Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton, Columbia UP, 1995.

5 Response-ability constitutes political ethics of care and is understood (after e.g., Haraway 2016) as openness to encounter; as the ability to respond with attentiveness, politeness and curiosity, and rendering each other capable. It is about “collective knowing, being and doing” (Bozalek and Zembylas 64). For further discussion on response-ability see: Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016.

mode of being and becoming. Such an understanding of hospitality resonates with the multimodal nature of comics and graphic novels, which engage readers through a dynamic interplay of different elements to promote empathy and solidarity.

COMICS: TEXT-IMAGE RELATIONS AND METHODOLOGY OF ANALYSIS

Comics and graphic novels carry enormous pedagogical potential (Blandón Gómez and Golovátina-Mora 149–178) beyond the classroom, and can become an important strategy for public education, for promoting the sensibility of hospitality. Like cinema, graphic novels and comics provide an immersive experience by appealing to multiple senses since they communicate through diverse modes such as the visual, verbal, and sequential (Kukkonen 75). The interplay between the image and the text prompts the reader to engage with the content in a different way, particularly in terms of empathy and identification, as the inclusion of both words and images affects the reader's relationship to protagonists and to the narrative itself. Through their form and techniques, graphic novels encourage active participation and invite readers to interact with the narrative, which transforms passive observation into empathy and sensitivity toward the Other (Polak 25–29; Chute 112). By the same token, Chatman claims that reading a graphic narrative elicits responsiveness by inviting one to look where they might not want to look, and to empathize with the experiences of others (38).

In their work on hospitality and comics, Gusain and Jha elaborate on ethical relations between the reader and the text that such immersiveness generates, ensuring the active participation of the reader, which “converts the passive gaze into empathy and identification” (615). The accessible manner of the narrative allows the comics to present complex ideas; creates “safety” and distance to engage in critical discussion of painful topics; presents the stories of others, those who are put on the margins of society (Gusain and Jha 54). Due to the relations between image and text, which decentralize the power struggle between different media and deconstruct the dominance of the text, comics/graphic novels with their form itself teach hospitality. The images are not illustrations for the text; they have agency of their own. They may lead in one frame, appeal to emotions through color, composition, graphics, and let the word lead in the next frame. As Nick Sousanis summarizes it in his graphic novel, “each informs and enriches the other to achieve a meaning” (64). By the same token, Harvey claims that image and text do not exist independently of each other. Sousanis

further elaborates, “embedded within the sequential-simultaneous ecosystem that is comics, words and pictures, long kept apart are finally allowed to cohabit. Joined in relationship, visual and verbal intermingle...” (64).

These considerations guide our methodology in engaging with the graphic novel *En el ombligo*. It is not limited to semiotic analysis of media representation of the ideas but becomes an immersive, deep reading, which requires allowing oneself to be affected and then reflect on the nature of the impact, feelings, and thoughts the novel and its elements generate. In other words, our methodology is hospitality itself that facilitates our understanding of the subject of the article. This approach to reading, rooted in hospitality and emotional engagement, may be relevant when examining the reintegration challenges faced by former FARC combatants.

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COMICS AND THE PEACE PROCESS IN COLOMBIA

The problems and challenges of ex-FARC members and their reintegration process have become the topic of TV series and documentaries, such as, for example, *Strangers to Peace*, which tells the stories of three ex-FARC guerrillas as they try to reintegrate into society, or *La Niña*, the Colombian drama series, based on the true story of the recruitment of children in the armed conflict and their reintegration. Such media play an active and important role in the exploration and communication of difficult and sensitive issues concerning the Colombian context and the ongoing peace process (Redwood and Wedderburn 589–590).

The Colombian government, and national and international NGOs encouraged and enabled communication strategies and narratives in their attempts to address the historical truths, give voice to many victims of the conflict, reveal new details of suffering, and work through memories and traumas. Many of these projects illustrate the reality of Colombian families who have been directly impacted by the armed conflict. The variety of narrative formats creates alternative spaces for reflection, processes for social change, peace and memory. Since the signing of the peace treaty with the FARC guerrillas in 2016, the thematic interest of the literature of the conflict has shifted from the immediate narrative of the horror of war to the question of how to ensure peace and reconciliation. The graphic narrative has been increasingly recognized as a tool to reach out to a broader audience, including younger readers, to discuss the tragedy of the armed conflict in Colombia and sensitize the hardship of the period following the peace treaty.

Catalá-Carrasco, Drinot, and Scorer claim, in their introduction to *Comics and Memory in Latin America*, that “comics, and more recently graphic novels, are increasingly understood as cultural artifacts that open unique and compelling windows not only onto mass or popular culture but also onto social, cultural, and political processes that have helped define the region since comic art began to appear in mass media in the early twentieth century” (3). While Colombia does not have a long tradition of comics and graphic novels, it does have a rich history of political and editorial cartoons. In 2012, an amendment to the country’s book law acknowledged graphic narratives and comics as valuable forms of cultural expression, granting them the same tax exemptions as literature and scientific publications.

In 2021, at the School of Social Communication and Journalism of Universidad Externado de Colombia, a group of scholars began to study the ways through which the internal conflict has been represented in comics and graphic novels. The research team wanted to identify the types of stories, the voices, the manifestations of war, etc., and began a project called “Vignettes of War” (Orejuela). The graphic narratives that have been produced since the beginning of the peace process address the conflict in different ways. In some of them, the conflict appears as a backdrop story, as historical or political context, as a mode of naming and defining a character, etc. Many of these narratives are strongly affected by the objectives of truth commissions and their ways of re-constructing the past. Quite often they reflect the official state narrative in relation to the peace process, and often they limit themselves to presenting only one part of the conflict and, thus, omit atrocities and massacres from collective memory (Tutkal 62).

EN EL OMBLIGO: INTRODUCING THE NOVEL

En el ombligo. Diarios de guerra y paz en Colombia, the work we focus on in this article, is an award-winning graphic novel (XIV Premio Fnac-Salamandra Graphic) that tells the story of ex-guerrillas of the FARC-EP during the three years following the signing of the 2016 Peace Accord. In April 2017, a young Catalan anthropologist, Gala Rocabert Navarro, arrived in the town of Pongores, in the department of La Guajira, with a foundation working on the implementation of the agreements to document the DDR process in situ. This visit is the origin of *En el ombligo*, which is a hybrid form of graphic reportage, field diary, and travelogue in which, with the help of the illustrations of her friend Anna-Lina Mattar, Gala recounts her experiences, the problems

she lived through, and the small personal stories of the reintegration of the guerrillas into Colombian society.

The book is 199 pages long. Its graphic style is quite simple. The novel uses only three colors: white, salmon red, and blue, which at times resemble the colors of the Colombian flag print that could be seen in the windows of many neighborhood corner stores, faded with exposure to the sun. This creates a sense of familiarity, an everyday routine, the light of the sun that, in combination with text, might create a distant sense of the heat Gala talks about throughout the novel. The simplicity of the graphic and its colors allows us to concentrate more on the content of the novel, one's own reactions, and the effects the novel produces. It creates the feeling of naivety and youth, the voice of an enthusiastic and idealistic young graduate anthropologist.

En el ombligo does not follow the formal structure of the graphic novel. It contains pages or even double pages with no more than one drawing. There are pages where the graphic elements are accompanied by text, and sometimes there are just drawings. There are also parts that are handwritten pages from a personal diary, and print pages that are emails to family or friends. The intensity of the handwriting reveals the overwhelming intensity of her thoughts and feelings. While the handwriting is quite difficult to read, it could be a graphic choice of the authors. These elements create a form of rhythm of the stop-motion: fluid yet fragmented, which ensures concentration and encourages reflection, and invites us to empathize with the author, the characters, the story, and the reintegration process.

In a cinematic way, the graphics provide the atmosphere. The images do not merely illustrate, but are an active part of the narrative. The distance between the graphic elements creates space for reflection, thinking over, observing together with Gala, or individually. This space is like margins for ethnographic notes, or our own diary. The novel becomes in a way participatory (collaborative) action research with the readers as co-researchers, who feel involved in the peace process, even if they are not Colombian nationals. The authors create the space for engagement, reflection, questions. With the graphics and notes, fragments of the diverse topics and voices, they suggest tools for critical engagement. By the end of the research-novel Gala distances from the reader and the focus of the novel, and finally leaves the camp, leaving the readers empowered and ready for their own journey.

Before we explore the hospitality theme in *En el ombligo*, it is essential to contextualize the Colombian armed conflict and the peace and reintegration processes, which constitute a critical backdrop to understanding the narrative's themes.

COLOMBIAN ARMED CONFLICT

The conflict was initiated in 1964 as a reaction to decades of political redistribution of power between Liberals and Conservatives, which was accompanied by violence, assassinations, and persecutions. The conflict's actors included the Colombian government, far-right paramilitary groups, criminal groups, and far-left guerrilla factions, among which the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was the largest. Various armed actors had different motives. Left-wing guerrillas such as FARC advocated for social justice to address poverty and state violence. The governmental forces would appeal for restoring the preestablished order, whose questioning urged the formation of the left-wing guerrilla groups. The overall methods of combat were quite similar across all the groups (Pizarro Leongómez and Peñaranda 167–172).

The human costs, especially in the rural areas, have been devastating and counted millions of displaced people. Hundreds of thousands disappeared, were killed or kidnapped. Quite often the territories and individuals fell victim to different competing groups, and were caught in the cross-fire. The reports and studies emphasize that despite the horrors of the ongoing conflict and its long nature, despite distrust in neighbors, people developed strategies of resistance with contingent hope and dignity, and rebuilt their communities (“The human cost...”; Sánchez García and Hincapié Gómez 58, 66; Arias López 248–249). Such strategies employed in post-conflict territories (Dasuky Quiceno et al. 77–86) inspired people to embrace the proposals of the peace accords; they explain commitment to civil participation and activism, and the higher approval of forgiveness and FARC reintegration in the social and political life of the country by the victims directly impacted by the conflict than from the non-victims (García-Sánchez and Plata-Caviedes 279–285; “El perdón...”).

The hybridity and complexity of the reality of violence implies the complexity of hospitality as a way of resisting violence, of healing, learning and remembering. The violence of the state and the counter-violence it provoked were met with the hospitality of its main victims, whose only condition was to respect “the basic guarantees of the communities” and “keep the war from their territories” (Rojas).

THE PEACE PROCESS

In 2016, the Colombian government and FARC signed a historic ceasefire agreement, followed by a revised peace deal approved by the Congress. While generally supported, the peace accords

and the following process have been quite controversial (Garzón-Ramírez 651; García-Sánchez and Plata-Caviedes 279–285; “El perdón...”). Ex-FARC members were guaranteed seats in Congress, which sparked opposition from critics of the deal who believed that FARC leaders should be prevented from running for office until they had served their sentences. However, the decision was made to demobilize all those who were part of the guerrilla ranks to facilitate their reintegration into civilian life and to bring an end to the country’s decades-long civil war. *Perdón*, Spanish for forgiveness, was announced as the motor of the peace process and, according to a survey conducted by the Ideas for Peace Foundation in 2015, more than 80% of respondents recognized and supported the idea of forgiveness. In the process of the creation of the culture of forgiveness as an integral part of the process of reconciliation, it has been established that forgiveness does not mean forgetting or ignoring justice (“El perdón...”). The results of the survey showed that while supporting the abstract idea of forgiveness, the number of respondents would also support the idea of forgiving the concrete actors. While 60% of the respondents of the survey were willing to forgive FARC, only 56% were willing to forgive the state, and 54% of the respondents were willing to forgive the paramilitary groups.

The varied attitudes toward forgiveness reflect the complexities of reconciliation in a post-conflict context. In response to these challenges, Colombia embarked on the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process, which contributes to the security and stability of the post-conflict societies by disarming combatants, removing them from military structures, and providing socio-economic programs to integrate them into society. It has become a mainstream procedure in post-conflict stabilization programs proposed by governments and international institutions in their efforts to provide the conditions to pursue recovery and development strategies in conflict-affected countries (IDDRS). According to the *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards* of the United Nations (IDDRS), the DDR process encompasses four stages that follow a sequential order: disarmament, demobilization, reinsertion, and reintegration. Recently the mechanism has evolved to include psychological support, social reconciliation, and transitional justice (Jones-Chaljub 15). DDR programs recognize that removing weapons from the hands of fighters and dismantling their organization is certainly a step forward in improving security, but it is by no means enough to achieve peace. The biggest challenges lie in ensuring that the former combatants can reintegrate into society, and in preventing them from taking up arms again (Berdal and Ucko 2–3).

Within the framework of the peace agreement, twenty-four Territorial Training and Reincorporation Spaces were created to temporarily house ex-combatants and to give them a space to set up productive projects as part of their reintegration process. Ex-combatants have opted for quite a diverse range of projects. La Montaña is just one of more than 4,200 *proyectos productivos* in Colombia. Its 24 staff members manufacture backpacks, clothes, hammocks, and money belts in the name of peace (Askham). Under the brand Manigua de Paz (*Jungle of Peace*), nearly 100 former combatants turn cocoa beans into gourmet chocolate bars to create livelihoods for their communities (“hd” Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue). Among the different recovery strategies, tourism (Otis; Van Broeck et.al.) has emerged as an attractive alternative to help restore the economic base and to generate jobs across a wide supply chain.

Many ex-combatants have had to face the overwhelming challenge of creating a path towards stabilization and reconstruction. In the following section, in the form of a summary for this part of the article we will briefly address some problems with their social reintegration.

PROBLEMS WITH SOCIAL REINTEGRATION AS THE QUESTION OF HOSTIPITALITY

As with any protracted conflict, Colombia’s armed conflict leaves deep scars in the society: increasing socioeconomic gaps, prejudices that reinforce stigmatization and exclusion. All this makes it even more difficult for demobilized fighters to be accepted as legitimate members of society (IDDRS). Being a multidimensional process, reconciliation requires all the parties to peacefully address any tension and engage in its resolution. It requires the goodwill of all the parties, as well as societal acceptance, forgiveness and support (Murillo Orejuela and Restrepo-Plaza 36), and sufficient infrastructure for reintegration that would ensure fair distribution of the resources (Tutkal 76). This would constitute the culture of forgiveness (“El perdón...”), as well as the culture of hospitality (Robert 156).

The nation-state system and its neoliberal version is intrinsically violent. The neoliberal market discourse appeals to the value of the rights of an individual as a universal value, which is limited to the rights of the privileged social groups. Individual life outside of such groups loses its value beyond the functionality of the productivity of an individual. In other words, a person is valued only to the extent of their service in support of the established hierarchical structures (Shapiro 110–131; Gusain and Jha 53–66; Tutkal 62–78; Hristov 4–5). Speaking about

the neoliberal model of the peace process, Tutkal highlights that “human rights become subordinated to a definition of ‘common good’ in which corporate interests take priority over the interest of local communities, and their resistance to the projects of neoliberal peace precipitates new cycles of disappearance and displacement” (63). The formal peace accords and their implementation did not address social stratification or systemic racism, despite quite strong articulation of the roots of these problems in Colombia and Latin America in general. People, their materiality, and the materiality of their immediate environments, their diversity, and intersectionality are taken outside the brackets of consideration; in other words, they are ignored and silenced.

The strategies of reintegration involved capacity building and training in developing diverse skills for reintegration, such as economic literacy, different crafts and vocational training, and programs of reintegration with families. At the same time, reintegration with the family would imply longitudinal psychological work for all the members of the family. After years of not being able to maintain any communication—for reasons of security, for example, as *En el ombligo* elaborates, the family members may appear as a group of strangers for an ex-combatant with whom they might have nothing in common.

EN EL OMBLIGO: ANALYSIS

REHABILITATION CAMP

The novel’s depiction of the reintegration center in Pondores, Guajira, establishes an immediate sense of place that shapes readers’ perceptions of the former combatants and the beginning of the reintegration process. On the one hand, it conveys a sense of hospitality as the center is a place of refuge, respect, and new beginning, and it highlights the ethical responsibility to provide the ex-combatants with dignity as they transition to civilian life. On the other hand, however, the placement of the rehabilitation camp in the desert (Sánchez Caicedo 3–26; Prieto et al.; Rocabert Navarro and Mattar 48, 146) causes unnecessary hardship for those ex-guerrillas who were used to living in the mountains and forests. The houses eventually built for them were often, as the reports suggest, not designed for the climatic conditions of the desert, and even though they provided shelter from the sun, they were largely unlivable because of the heat. Limitations on the use of land on the territories of rehabilitation camps would, as Prieto et al. indicate in their report, limit the possibilities of economic reintegration and simply be confusing even for a willing, resilient, and enthusiastic individual.

The members of the rehabilitation camp community, *En el ombligo* describes, refer to the difficulties of dealing with bureaucracy. Without the special skills of writing petitions, requests for subsidies or grants, or even knowledge about the available resources, access to them could be limited for the ex-combatants, or they might face certain disadvantages. Gala is aware of these difficulties as she is the one responsible for applying for grants. Another example is the process of obtaining *cédula*, the national identity card, a legal marker of belonging. One of the protagonists of *En el ombligo* receives his Colombian ID by the end of the novel. The long process of waiting for the document illustrates the difficulty, obstructions, prejudices and inefficiencies of the state. It mirrors the slow and painful process of reintegration. However, it may be understood as an act of closure, a moment of reconciliation and full acceptance within the social fabric of the nation.

The issues of security appear, among other difficulties, in literature about reintegration, in reports, and comics. The rejection that the integration process generated in some groups (e.g., victims, other illegal armed groups, the army, etc.) poses security threats to the lives of reintegrating actors. Without arms or community protection, ex-combatants are vulnerable to retaliation (Nussio 580). Since 2016, nearly 400 ex-FARC fighters have been assassinated, with many others displaced, particularly in rural areas. Failures by ex-President Iván Duque's administration to prioritize reforms, such as land redistribution, further deepened inequality and insecurity, leaving ex-combatants as well as other participants of the conflict feeling betrayed (Sponsel; Sánchez Caicedo 74–75; Prieto et al.).

This model follows Derrida's definition of conditional hospitality or rather *hostipitality*. Peace accords and institutionalization of the reintegration process were not collaborative and community-led but constituted a social contract "from outside and above," as it was well summarized in the petitions of the Indigenous authorities of Cauca to Juan Manuel Santos regarding the peace, dignity, and autonomy of the Indigenous territories (Monroy Gómez). Under this social contract, the ex-combatants agree to cease fire and give in their weapons, reintegrate into society, and become productive members of society, in exchange for economic, political, and judicial benefits. In fact, some of the successful business ideas mentioned in this article relied on the skills developed during their life as guerillas: knowing how to read the forest and mountains, knowing how to be part of them (Muggah 124). From this perspective, the value of the ex-combatants as people expands and reveals their multidimensionality without unnecessary romanticization or justification of the committed crimes

and violence. It works even as a resistance to violence, as an affirmative and nonreductive approach.

Reintegration is considered an economic issue, but “it is assumed that the victims may be ‘reintegrated’ by participating in economic activities” (Pardo Abril 31). An abstract uniformed and statically imagined Other is invited to enter the preexisting abstract and statically imagined “home.” The former FARC combatants are positioned within the social contract as the “stranger,” someone who is from outside, beyond the boundaries of the community. The contract implies that only the stranger has to change, and although it announces forgiveness, the implementation of the reintegration process in fact resembles a form of punishment.

Many still see ex-combatants as former enemies rather than neighbors. Reintegration is hindered by lingering fears of a relapse into violence, both systemic and structural, and the government’s insufficient support. This reinforces the stigmatization of ex-FARC combatants as the (only) source of violence (Carranza-Franco 4–5). Throughout the years of violence and political turmoil, this strangeness has become entrenched in armed conflict, blending closeness with distance, belonging with exclusion. The stranger, originating from outside the community, from the Colombian jungles, often provokes hostility and resentment, as when fighting for their convictions, they resorted to organized crime, repressive tactics, and extensive human rights violations. How, then, should we engage with those identified as strangers within the nation due to their engagement in guerrilla warfare? In “Avowing—The Impossible,” Derrida asserts that hospitality is essential for peaceful and true coexistence, and suggests finding ways to live with strangers, embracing both the unfamiliar and the familiar in shared spaces (24).

While this is, of course, an abstract model of reality (Kumar 82–85) that unfortunately often defines the norms and mentality anticipating more efficient practice, the reality is more resilient and complex. This complexity, supported by the long history of its critical revision in Latin America and Colombia in particular, facilitates forgiveness, adaptation, empathy, resistance to violence, and eventually reintegration of the ex-combatants.

Comics, as we suggested earlier, can sensitize the complexity of reality, conflict and its magnitude, its systemic nature. They can open a safe space in which to pose critical questions and hopefully look for more sustainable solutions for peace.

STRANGERS

From the first pages of the novel, the reader, together with the ex-combatants, learns about the new reincorporation space in Pongores. The explorative and observational style of the narrative sets the slower rhythm of figuring out, of making sense of the new reality, understanding what to do next, and who one is when a significant part of oneself has given in. “It is difficult to be locked in one place now; before we would always be on the move,”⁶ confess the women of the camp to Gala (37). “So many years of being a guerrilla. And now what? Who am I then? Submitting the weapons is like giving up part of my soul,” another woman reveals some pages later (76). “It was difficult to be in the war. But it is more difficult now outside. That I know with all clarity,” says another ex-guerrilla woman later in the novel (137). Ex-combatants become strangers to their own selves. What accentuates this fact is their application for identification documents (*cédula*). They have to choose a new civil name, not a war-related one. Yeferson, one of the ex-combatants, claims that people who are strangers to the dominant culture and structures have their original names silenced. The new names are assigned to them (58), which resonates with the common missionary practice of assigning names to Indigenous populations in Colombia as if erasing their originary selves.

Conditional hospitality involves relinquishing the stranger in the Self as irrelevant and insignificant to the new circumstances, focusing instead on constructing a completely new personality. In contrast, unconditional hospitality embraces the Other within the Self, seeking reconciliation, forgiveness, and mutual change. It proposes learning to evolve together, mutating into something new that is enriched by the presence of the Other, by the diversity and complexity of reality.

In the final parts of the book, Gala establishes a routine and feels more at home with the community. However, she can still be confused: being attacked by bees, she goes astray when everyone else acts as one group organism (116). Gala, the protagonist of the novel, is herself a stranger: a Catalan in Colombia; a city person in the wilderness of the rehabilitation camp; a civilian in the community of the ex-combatants; a newcomer and an outsider in the community of people sharing the past experience, beliefs, and fears. We recognize Gala’s strangeness, her liminal position between the ex-combatants, who are, on the one hand, strangers to the peaceful life, but on the other, they are insiders. As a non-national, Gala is a symbolic guide for the reader,

6 All the translations from *En el ombligo* in this article are our own.

for the ex-combatants and the narrative itself. The novel contributes to the long tradition in world literature of liminal characters as guides, mentors and shapeshifters (Vizenor 196; Spisak 79, 122, 128), who deconstruct the monolith of the narrative. Gala's liminality enables navigation between seemingly opposite spaces, and her outsideness questions the monolithic appearance of these spaces, concepts and judgments, and eventually reveals their own liminality or hybridity. This very quality makes Gala an agent of hospitality.

GUIDES

When Gala enters the ex-combatants' camp she is welcomed by their community: strangers to the state. The ex-combatants act as hosts for the stranger, Gala, but guests in the peaceful life she represents. She, as a guest-host embraces the life in the camp, a strange lifestyle for her. Ex-combatants open up to her with their stories, intimate thoughts, their pasts; she learns to know them by allowing the strangeness to affect her: soon enough (50) she stops insisting on filling out her surveys about them, but starts with smaller steps by joining the community and the shared effort of building it. She carries logs, cleans, cooks, contributes to the construction of the camp and crop cultivation, and starts wearing boots and pants as the environment requires, instead of flip-flops and shorts as she initially chose (51, 69, 90). Throughout the novel guest becomes host becomes guest, and reveals the porosity between these two identities. Two strangers, ex-combatant Yeferson and Gala, start a family, share a household, cultivate the land together, and get a pet chicken as a present from a farmer from outside the camp. Gala guides Yeferson toward civil life. Yeferson guides her on her way to embrace the camp life, to get familiar with the ex-combatant experience, knowledge, and being.

At the beginning of the novel, Yeferson, together with other ex-combatants, expresses reluctance to reunite with their long-lost families. In the second half of the novel, Yeferson and Gala walk together out of the camp to search for Yeferson's family. It could be seen as a story of successful reintegration if one focuses on the intentions and efforts of the ex-combatants. As they travel, the world welcomes them with a mix of familiarity and warmth. Family and friends express joy at seeing Yeferson alive, inquiring about his return, while farmers engage them with questions about the harvest. The places they visit are depicted as dynamic, hybrid spaces. Along their path, civilians share personal stories of hardship, highlighting shared vulnerability to exploitation, regardless of whether the perpetrators were the FARC,

the government, the police, or paramilitary forces (139). Yeferson himself recounts a childhood memory of a boy being killed on a local football field, narrating the event without judgment, fear, or a desire for retribution (152). Instead, his reflection underscores the importance of acknowledging, remembering the victim.

Individual, yet intra-connected with the rest of the community, remembering is at the core of hospitality: remembering the victims, respecting one's contribution, thoughts and work. The novel summarizes this idea with the story of weaving a *Wiwa* bag: "The ancestors explained that the plant we use to weave our bags, *maguey*, was a woman who was leaving them, but they asked her for advice and took care of her so that she would stay. That is why, when one knits, one has good thoughts, of good life, gives her love, because she takes care of the family, and supports the work of *los mamos* (spiritual leaders of the Sierra Nevada communities)" (170). This thinking of good life gives another dimension to the contingent hope: it makes it a form of healing through remembering understood as respecting everyone who ever contributed, is contributing and will be contributing to the community, as reconnecting with them, weaving all the memories of past, present and future together (Aldemar Rodríguez, Rodríguez Villamil, and Gutiérrez González 9–16). With its form and content, its careful attention to detail, the graphic novel as if insists that such solidarity cannot be reduced to ten dollars a tourist might pay for a *Wiwa* bag, to a *cédula*, the opening of a bank account or the construction of a little house that is too hot to live in the climate of the desert.

During the course of Gala and Yeferson's trip, after hearing all the stories, the readers learn that the state reduces its citizens to a faceless monolithic mass. They remain outsiders to hierarchical power structures, and they constitute collateral damage in the pursuit of political or strategic objectives. For these civilians, violence and death are ever-present aspects of existence. A village woman warns Gala about the river that recently took a woman's life (162), emphasizing the absence of infrastructure. In their world, threats arise not only from human actors—whether neighbors or state forces—but also from nature itself. Death and danger are not alien intrusions but are deeply integrated into everyday life. Nature, however, is not merely a source of peril. It provides sustenance, shelter, beauty, and opportunities for self-discovery and learning. It communicates its dangers and teaches those willing to listen how to interpret its signs and heal from its challenges. While inherently dangerous, nature is also unconditionally welcoming.

Neighbors, too, are multifaceted figures, capable of dual roles. A neighbor might be a combatant in disguise, someone complicit in violence, or simply someone paralyzed by fear. Yet neighbors and even strangers are also portrayed as agents of solidarity, helping the persecuted to escape or hide (82–83; 138–141). The novel recounts instances where combatants carried wounded comrades, despite the risks and delays, actions that the state soldiers reportedly exploited (82–83). The text highlights the acts of kindness rooted in genuine care for the other, whether stranger or acquaintance. These gestures include offering mosquito repellents, reminding someone to eat, warning about impending storms, or lending resources such as a mule or motorbike. Such acts may sometimes aim to minimize communal risk but are also driven by a desire to alleviate unnecessary suffering. Unconditional hospitality is woven into these small, attentive actions, which blur the line between familiarity and strangeness. Nature, the land, and non-hierarchical, horizontal social networks thrive on diversity and hybridity, forming a resilient foundation for the ecosystem's sustainability.

The state, on the other hand, relies on hierarchy and is driven by the logic of exclusion and unification (monoculture). Its conditional hospitality is hostile. It distorts the fruitful order of life and bends it to the immediate needs of the selected few, which causes the resistance of the excluded, which that state tries to put under control, to eliminate, silence, or punish (128). Everyone is a stranger to the state; and, therefore, anyone can eventually be seen by it as a threat and presented as such. A story, shared by one ex-combatant, about a politician who turned out to be a devil, summarizes this sentiment (96). There is again no judgment in this story. It is recognized as a reality. This is not apathy; nor is it naive ignorance. Gala writes that Yeferson always tells her that one does not have to give in to a bad life (147). This is contingent hope as an expression of resilience nurtured throughout centuries of violence for some, decades, or a few years for others. It is a recognition of one's vulnerability with humility. It is unconditional hospitality to the Other of life.

People give ex-combatants another chance, and welcome them as a marginalized group. This echoes the survey showing higher public support for the idea of ex-FARC political participation among the victims of the conflict than among the non-victims (“El perdón...”). This is not an act of justification or forgiveness of murders and destruction: “The scars can never heal, says one of the ex-combatants, because they are the scars of the soul” (Rocabert Navarro, and Mattar 79). It is an act of non-repetition. “So many years in the guerrilla, and it is still the same

bad,” says Yeferson, looking at the situation in his native community (175). It is an attempt to try a different method of resistance: No one deserves to be silenced and subjected to passive representation. Permitted once, this practice will justify silencing the Others.

The final page, with the representation of a kiss and embrace between Yeferson and Gala might be, then, symbolic: two strangers welcome each other, allow each other to be affected by the other and their knowledge, get transformed, and together transform the community (194).

HOSPITALITY AS COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY

The abovementioned encounter of strangers was made possible by the official peace accords. It required the predisposition of all the actors involved. Gala accompanied and guided Yeferson through his journey of reintegration. It might have worked without her. The unconditional hospitality of the horizontal community of strangers, however, would imply welcoming anyone willing to join and welcome anyone's contribution. There is no entitlement or expectation of help, but a readiness to accept it if it is offered. There is no judgment, but a calm embrace of diversity and ever-changing reality. This open, inclusive approach to community is not only vital to personal reintegration but reflects a deeper, cultural understanding of community that is prevalent in Colombia and Latin America.

Community, as a concept, plays a significant role in shaping social structures and individual identities in these regions. It could be explained with Boorstin's idea of community building as compensation for loss and alienation in the immigrant society or the risk society. Gala, indeed, writes in her diary that “a collective is an armor that allows them to overcome pain and fear” (71). She continues that everyone means a lot for the community and brings something unique to it, with their being, past, and their diverse histories.

From the relational perspective, community is a worldview where the world is seen as shared (Kohn 9). This community includes now living human members, ancestors, and non-human members such as land, plants, animals and rivers. This is a hospitable community. Removing one member destroys the ecosystem of the entire collective. Responsive and response-able introduction of a new member may contribute and strengthen the ecosystem.

In a similar way, Gala and Yeferson's process of community building can be seen as collective effort and shared experience, where the inclusion of diverse perspectives and contributions strengthens the whole environment. Together, through the specificity of the genre

of a graphic novel, Gala and Yeferson guide the reader in their recognition of the complexity of the reality they share, in pursuit of building a community of solidarity. "A lot of people come here," Gala writes in her diary. "Journalists, institutions, NGOs, the sensationalists, politicians [...] with a lot of proposals, all disjointed and decontextualized. I feel there is a lack of sensibility and understanding from both sides" (71). The comics could aim at helping to facilitate such sensibility. The travelogue and field trip notes, along with the narrative style of *En el ombligo*, create a sense of external observation. At the same time, the immersive quality of the comic's graphics and rhythm creates an opportunity for readers to co-experience the narrative.

The graphic novel focuses on a fraction of the social reintegration process of ex-FARC guerrillas, offering a glimpse into a small situated experience without an ambition to speak for the entire nation. In fact, Gala speaks for herself, describing her contact with the community. The documentary style of the narrative indicates the diversity of voices in the reality. As an artistic product, the graphic novel manipulates reality: focusing on the underrepresented voices of women, children, and Indigenous people; it is fragmented, at times out of context; at times, it can be too idealistic and even utopian. Yet it is the voice, it is the reality that hopefully can reach out and touch at least one reader.

The simplicity of comics radiant with kindness invites the reader to think of hospitality not as a universal narrative but as an everyday act. This act may appear to be simple, but it requires an everyday work of humility and giving up control and power over the reality and Self. It also refers to the spiritual work of reaching out to the extended community of ancestors and the land, and of asking the community for protection and reintegration (157). This notion of spiritual work and reintegration is deeply rooted in cultural practices such as *ombligamiento*, which underscores the sacred connections between individuals, their communities, and the land.⁷

7 *La ombligada* or *ombligamiento* is an ancestral practice of some black communities settled in the Colombian Pacific territory-region and Indigenous people of Colombia. The rite makes the newborn become a useful person to the community. The first of these rituals is celebrated when someone is born, and the mother buries the placenta and the umbilical cord under the house or the germinating seed. The second occurs when it is necessary to heal the wound left by the umbilicus when it separates from the body. Colombian historian and folklorist Sergio Antonio Mosquera "recognizes that scholars do not understand whether *la ombligada* originated with Indigenous peoples in the Pacific lowlands or if enslaved Africans brought the practice with them. But he insists on a more concrete point: that the different ethnic groups shared the space of the forest and learned from

En el ombligo, the title of the novel, translates into English as “In the belly button.” It refers to aspects of the cosmovision of Indigenous communities and to the spiritual practice of protecting a newborn child. It is understood as disconnection from the human mother and reconnection with Mother Earth (61), the land, and community. In short, it is a ritual in which one becomes part of a bigger structure. The belly button symbolizes personal identity, ancestral wisdom, and cosmic unity, a physical link to cultural heritage. It promotes the holistic well-being of individuals and communities. *El ombligo* is a sensitive scar, an embodied memory of one’s origin and connectivity. Through this practice, cultural socialization begins, creating a sense of belonging to a particular territory and community. This complex system works to maintain collective life. The *obligamiento* allows the disappearance of the false antagonism between nature and culture driven globally by the rationality of the modern white capitalist world system (Hurtado Garcés). In the context of the novel, it may symbolize the process of reintegration of ex-FARC guerrillas with their community, their symbolic comeback to a life of peace and solidarity.

CONCLUSIONS

En el ombligo shows what the reintegration process has been like and how the demobilized combatants live after laying down their arms. The reader can experience the pitfalls and difficulties the ex-guerrillas had to go through in their lives in the midst of the armed conflict, and in relation to the demobilization programs that the government has offered them. The reader can experience their feelings and frustrations, and also the benefits, hopes, and illusions of a change in their existence. They require a hospitable audience, and therefore the question of ethics is crucial when dealing with their life narratives. *En el ombligo* focuses on a fraction of the social reintegration process of ex-FARC guerrillas, offering a glimpse into a small, localized experience. It does not attempt to portray the national scope of the process; therefore, it should be seen as a modest step towards fostering empathy for the diverse experience of ex-combatants and accepting their complex narratives. In the current context, one can hope that it will also serve as an input to the peace process with the FARC-EP as graphic narrative is not necessarily just a way of simplifying a complex mass of information.

one another, and that *la obligada* was part of a set of practices that connected the natural and social worlds” (Mosquera 162–165).

Graphic narratives invite readers to feel the experiences of others, making them particularly effective in raising awareness about ex-combatants. The stories presented in *En el ombligo* are as important as official histories and play a key role in forming a holistic understanding of complex events. The decentering nature of the graphic novel's media invites the readers to approach the characters and their stories with empathy and so fosters unconditional hospitality. This empathic engagement is particularly relevant to the reintegration process in Colombia. Graphic novels can play a crucial role in sensibilizing the complexity of this process and its hybridity, by offering a platform for the marginalized voices and narratives; humanizing and diversifying the Other, in this case the ex-combatants as individuals whose lives have been marked by loss, pain, traumas, hopes and beliefs. By encouraging engaged reading, graphic novels foster the construction of a political community of ethical response-ability, and with this the solidarity of hospitality, for which the otherness is the source of new knowledge of self and of the shared inhabited space. As a site of a documentary, graphic novels may contribute to collective memories, and inspire, inform and shape public attitudes that can influence political decisions.

En el ombligo can be viewed as naïve at times but it inspires the readers to think of hospitality not as abstract pre-subjective characteristics but as culture that can be cherished. The culture of hospitality the novel introduces is not a culture of passive welcoming but a toil, an everyday act of care to work together, learn and transform for true long-lasting peace.

Abstract: On 24 November 2016, the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) signed a historic Peace Agreement to put a definitive end to the internal armed conflict that had lasted more than half a century. As part of the Agreement, an Amnesty Law was adopted, and a definitive bilateral ceasefire and cessation of hostilities were ordered. Disarmament measures were implemented and transitional camps were created to facilitate ex-guerrilla combatants' transition to legal life. However, the successful reintegration of individuals during the DDR (disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration) process is significantly influenced not only by the material conditions and other practical circumstances they encounter upon their return, but also by how they are received within their socio-cultural context.

The aim of this paper is to examine how the graphic novel *En el ombligo* serves as a lens for the theme of hospitality in the context of the peace process between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP. Specifically, it presents the challenges and complexities of transitioning from guerrilla warfare to civilian life. This research seeks to shed light on the potential of graphic novels as a medium for grappling with complex socio-political issues and fos-

tering processes of forgiveness and reconciliation, drawing on, among others, Derrida's philosophy of hospitality and Deleuze's philosophy of difference.

Keywords: Colombian armed conflict, hospitality, forgiveness, the Other, Jacques Derrida

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WHEN HOSPITALITY BECOMES DEADLY

Host-Guest Relations

in T. Kingfisher's *What Moves the Dead*

In literary studies, the concept of a “hostile environment” encompasses various themes, including the portrayal of violence, trauma, oppression, and struggles concerning identity. The present analysis will examine the concept of hospitality, highlighting its interpretation in relation to the dual meaning of the term “environment,” which encompasses both one’s immediate surroundings and the broader natural world. In T. Kingfisher’s novella *What Moves the Dead*, these environments manifest as increasingly hostile. By reimagining Edgar Allan Poe’s tale, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Kingfisher transforms the familiar into the unfamiliar and invites the reader to leave the comforts of the beloved short story. Jacques Derrida claims that “when hospitality takes place, the impossible becomes possible but *as impossible*” (Derrida 387). The claim that something impossible proves to be a reality because of hospitality perfectly fits with Kingfisher’s story, where a fungus becomes sentient as a result of being a guest inhabiting one of the characters. By introducing a fungus that infects and possesses living organisms, Kingfisher turns its hosts into hostages. The visitors to the Usher mansion, while partaking of the hospitality extended by their hosts, ultimately find themselves in peril due to both the fungus and the hosts’ actions. The story demonstrates that hospitality, irrespective of its form, carries the potential for adverse consequences for both hosts and guests. Through the application of selected aspects of the notion of hospitality in Derrida’s understanding, as well as the contextual use of ecoGothic, ecohorror, and ecophobia, this article explores the dimensions of hospitality from invitation, welcoming, and hostility to overstaying one’s welcome and the risks of hospitality.

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At the heart of Derrida's claim is the distinction and relation between "host" and "guest." He distinguished between conditional hospitality, in which one welcomes the guest under specific rules, laws, and expectations, and unconditional/absolute hospitality, in which the other is welcomed without any prerequisites. Kingfisher's novella presents the notion of hospitality as the host-guest relation in the traditional sense, as well as deals with the act of hosting the other in a manner intricately connected with the idea that becoming a host involves exposing oneself to risk, just as Derrida notes.

One of the most prevalent understandings of hospitality is that it entails welcoming a guest into one's home. In the novella, the Usher siblings host two guests, Alex Easton and James Denton, in their home, but from the very beginning, their presence there is marked by stark differences. According to Derrida, true hospitality does not begin with an invitation; rather, it is its lack that makes hospitality take its true form (398). The Ushers' guests are both invited and uninvited, as each received an invitation only from one of the hosts, thus leaving the other in the dark. Therefore, one of the hosts is allowed to be surprised and possibly exert true hospitality upon the guests. Denton received Roderick's invitation, but there was nothing social about the act: "Please, I beg of you, if there is any kindness in your heart left for either of us, come and help me" (Kingfisher 141). Roderick's desperation and yearning to save his sister lead him to abandon all the pretenses of hospitality, and because of that, one could assume that the future guest does not expect a warm welcome. Derrida observes: "When one invites, not only mustn't one send invitation cards and say 'I invite you,' it is me who invites. Not only must one not say this, but one must also not think it nor believe it, nor make it appear—to oneself or to the other" (398). Derrida seems to suggest that not only must the host avoid the act of inviting, but the guest must also not experience the invitation. If one considers the lack of grounds for hospitality, Denton does not experience true hospitality, as he is not only invited but also expected to use his skills as a physician. Alex's possible experience of true hospitality is not as straightforward. Although Madeline writes to the narrator, she does not outright invite her old friend to visit the Usher estate. Because Madeline does not provide a clear invitation in her letter concerning her failing health and possible imminent death, and Roderick is in the dark about Alex's visit, the narrator can possibly experience true hospitality in Derrida's understanding. Judith Still states that "[c]odes of hospitality suggest that the host will entertain the [...] guest, and an unwritten contract guards them both from harm" (20). Given the reasons behind the guests' visit, neither

guest expects to be especially well taken care of, but they probably do not expect to be put in harm's way. However, as it is later illustrated, being welcomed into the Usher house means abandoning virtually all aspects of the codes of hospitality.

Denton's arrival is not portrayed but readers are privy to Alex's arrival and welcome:

No one awaited me. Eventually, long after I had given up hope and was eyeing the door knocker and wondering whether to make a second go of it, the door creaked open. An elderly servant peered around the door and stared at me. It was not an insolent stare so much as a puzzled one, as if I were not only unexpected but completely outside his experience. (Kingfisher 12)

The fact that even the servant is unaware of the guest's arrival underscores Madeline's deliberate decision to keep her correspondence with Alex a secret. This secrecy effectively inhibited any preparation on the part of both the hosts and the household. The narrator is not only not properly welcomed upon arrival but is also reluctant to enter the Usher manor. This ambivalence not only signifies the unsettling atmosphere that pervades the setting but also alludes to the thematic conventions prevalent in horror literature, where such reluctance often foreshadows the horrible events that await inside. Still points out that "[h]ospitality is always about crossing thresholds," and although many a time the threshold is metaphorical, Alex literally walks through the Gothic door to the Usher mansion (7). The description of the darkness of the house upon entering and the comparison to the gloomy landscape outside point to the inhospitality of the building itself.

In numerous explorations of Poe's short story, the house is a focal point of the analysis; for instance, Hisnul Mar'atil Huda and Nasirin observe that "[t]he anthropomorphism of the house, described almost as a sentient being, aligns with [Eve Kosofsky] Sedgwick's notion of Gothic spaces that reflect and influence the characters' psychological states" (1330). In some ecocritical readings of "The Fall of the House of Usher," the house is blamed for its impact on the environment and not the characters. Sara L. Crosby argues that "it isn't the tarn that infects and oppresses Roderick Usher and his House; rather, the lordly mansion and the lord infect and oppress the tarn" (519). The characters in Kingfisher's story outright blame the house for Madeline and Roderick's deteriorating health, but as the readers and the characters discover, the building is not to blame. The blame for the Ushers' illnesses slowly shifts throughout the story, from the house to the lake to the fungus. Initially, the narrator notices the house's faults: its darkness, the permeating cold, and the mold. However, when Alex observes the anomalies

surrounding the lake, such as the inexplicable lights inside the tarn, the worrying behavior of animals in its surroundings, and Madeline's eerie connection to the body of water, the object of blame shifts. In the story, a particular type of fungus inhabits the lake and serves as a catalyst for the depicted anomalies. While the detrimental effects of the fungus are notable, it does not directly harm Roderick Usher. Nevertheless, because the fungus affects Madeline, whose condition precipitates Roderick's deterioration, it is to be seen as the underlying cause of both siblings' ailments. Consequently, the house—the essential place of hospitality—is not the culprit in the story; rather, it becomes a secondary victim of the fungus and the tarn, as water degrades its environment and impedes the mansion from fulfilling its purpose—being a home.

Despite its failings, the house is the place where hospitality occurs in the story. When Roderick sees Alex in the house, he is surprised and forgets the proper etiquette for welcoming a guest, but justifies it by stating: "It's been so long since I've had visitors that I've forgotten all my manners" (Kingfisher 16). This statement proves deceitful as he soon introduces Alex to James Denton. James is not an inhabitant of the house; he is a guest. Therefore, Roderick's quip about not having had guests may reveal the true purpose of James's visit: he is to treat Madeline and not to socialize. Nevertheless, James is Roderick's friend and is visiting his house; thus, one would assume he is to be treated as a guest, especially since he is not being paid to work while he resides in the Ushers' house. The lapse in speech could be explained by Roderick's deteriorating mental health as well as by the idea that if he invited James, then, as Derrida points out no true hospitality can take place. This turns James's stay into one with conditional hospitality, which can be seen as "the norms, laws and procedures which shape the operation and practice of hospitality in the real world" (Shepherd 63). Nonetheless, even though Alex believes Roderick knew about Madeline's letter, this might not be true. The narrator observes that "Roderick hadn't expected me, whatever that meant—possibly that he hadn't thought I was enough of a friend to come when he needed me, or perhaps he didn't think he needed me" (44). If Madeline kept the letter a secret, then she inadvertently (or purposefully?) creates a small rift between Roderick and Alex, which brings feelings of uncertainty to the surface and thus impacts the host-guest relations as neither is clear on the role of the other. Another explanation for Roderick's behavior could be the fact that he may not wish to welcome guests into his home, not only due to his and Madeline's poor health but also because of their financial struggles.

When Alex notices the state of the house and notes the frugality with which the household is maintained, the narrator experiences guilt of being hosted and feels the need to “make it up to him [Roderick] without appearing to offer charity” (Kingfisher 33). This raises the question of whether a guest should feel responsible for being an imposition on their host, especially if they are uninvited. When the exceedingly eerie occurrences transpire, and Madeline dies, the narrator chooses to shoulder the burden of solving the mysteries that abound and forgets to experience guilt, going so far as to violate the privacy of the hosts in order to figure out what truly transpired at the Usher estate. “Why was I here? Why was I skulking around Roderick’s manor like a thief, disturbing his sister’s rest? I was an old friend, yes, but I was violating all laws of hospitality and friendship” (111). The questioning of the narrator’s motivations suggests that Alex feels uncomfortable as a guest in Usher manor and that everything that is happening transcends the ordinary guest experience. Due to the circumstances, the violation of the host’s privacy seems somewhat justifiable, but it nullifies the remnants of hospitality between Alex and Roderick. Still asserts that “[t]he breakdown of hospitality [...] [may] easily spiral into terror” (20). When Alex discovers that Madeline was killed, the narrator realizes that unearthing the host’s secret may have put them in danger: “I was now in enemy territory, and my life and Angus’s [Alex’s batman] might very well hang in the balance” (112). Despite this awareness, the character does not manifest terror; rather, this recognition galvanizes them into action, reflecting their background as a soldier and familiarity with danger. However, the characters do experience fear, but they are afraid for each other rather than of each other. Alex is consumed by concern for the fate of an old friend and is anxious about the implications that will arise once the truth of Madeline’s murder is revealed. Concurrently, Roderick becomes increasingly protective of the narrator’s safety in the Usher house. This reciprocal fear between the host and the guest may suggest that, despite the failure of traditional notions of hospitality, the characters retain a genuine concern for one another, often prioritizing each other’s safety over their own.

Madeline Usher’s fate is intricately linked with unconditional hospitality, which leads her to become a bodily host for another species. The host is only a host if there is a stranger; without the other, there is no hospitality. Therefore, the identity of the host is dependent on the presence of the guest. However, this can also lead to the destabilization of the host’s position, as according to Derrida, the host can become a hostage. Notably, Madeline is not merely subjected

to the possession or forced infection of the fungus from the tarn, but her state could be read as her willingly helping it. This dynamic can urge toward the reading of the novella in light of hospitality regarding parasitic guests. On the one hand, such a reading can situate Madeline as a symbol of the natural environment, with the fungus serving as a representation of humanity's invasive presence on Earth. On the other hand, the fungal infection that in the novella spreads through the animal and human world, can represent the uncontrollable aspect of the environment. This perspective aligns with themes prevalent in ecohorror and ecoGothic literature, where the complexities of interspecies interactions reveal the nature of hospitality within ecological contexts.

The editors of the monograph study *EcoGothic*, Andre Smith and William Hughes, claim in the introductory essay that the “volume is the first to explore the Gothic through theories of ecocriticism” (1) as well as that it “explores how current ideas about ecocriticism can be applied to Gothic narratives in order to help draw out their often dystopian ecological visions” (4). The notion of the ecoGothic has been reinterpreted numerous times since its initial introduction. Scholars such as David Del Principe (2014), Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils (2018) and Sue Edney (2020) have put forward their own definitions and interpretations, each focusing on ecoGothic's unique manner of interpreting the literature, from comparing it to ecofeminism to focusing on the analysis of gothic gardens (Fitzgerald 259). In literature, ecoGothic is often intertwined with ecohorror, whose “problems and anxieties . . . are [nowadays frequently] the result of broader forces, represented not only as mad scientists, creatures, or animal attacks but also a far-reaching events or processes such as pollution, species extinction, or extreme weather” (Tidwell and Soles 2). Christy Tidwell explains that “[e]cohorror is often defined in terms of ‘revenge of nature’ narratives in which nature enacts violence on humans in response to the damage caused by human behaviors” (238). The ecohorror elements present in Kingfisher's novella are evident in the grotesque descriptions of fungal infestations and the way nature reclaims the human domain, blurring the boundaries between life and death.

Tidwell and Soles note that while Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils, among others, link Simon Estok's ecophobia to ecoGothic, Jennifer Schnell emphasizes that numerous scholars set the two terms apart (4, 16). Estok initially defined ecophobia as “an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism” (“Theorizing in a Space” 208). Yet, he also posits that “[e]cophobia

is a condition that allows humanity to do bad things to the natural world” (*The Ecophobia Hypothesis* 11), and his research “focuses on fears about transgressions of bodily boundaries and norms and how these threaten notions about human particularity” (“Introduction” 384). As Teresa Fitzpatrick emphasizes, ecophobia is also closely connected to ecohorror, and “there are inevitable overlaps with ecogothic” (260). Even though “ecohorror and ecogothic share a concern with the human-nonhuman dynamic, ecohorror has a focus on the uneasy relationship between human and nonhuman, where the natural world is viewed as monstrous/monstrously wronged with humanity at its center” (260). For the purposes of the present study, the link between ecophobia, ecoGothic, and ecohorror should be acknowledged, as the characters in Kingfisher’s novella harm the fungus to some extent due to their fear and lack of understanding of it. The novella’s ecophobia stems from the fear of nature’s otherness and its capacity to enter and alter human bodies and spaces, representing the fear of the environment’s ability to diminish or even destroy human identity and control—situations in which the fear is no longer irrational. Madeline perfectly illustrates this notion, as with the progress of the fungal infection, she gradually loses control over her body and her mind, thus losing the very thing that makes her who she is. The uncanny aspect of the infection—its ability to mimic life and manipulate its hosts—heightens the abovementioned fear and creates a sense of helplessness and dread. However, one must recognize that not every act of violence toward the environment and its nonhuman inhabitants in gothic and/or horror fiction derives from ecophobia, because “some fears of the nonhuman world are justified, not irrational” (Tidwell and Soles 5). It could be argued that, in *What Moves the Dead*, the author presents ecophobia: the characters are wary of the tarn before they have evidence of the fungus’s presence, and they do not understand its motivations. On the other hand, their fear becomes rational when it comes to light that the maid’s suicide was rooted in her being forced to host the fungus, and the emotion intensifies when Madeline asks Alex to become the fungus’s next host, which may suggest the possibility of its further spread throughout the world. Considering both perspectives, it can be assumed that the characters exhibit rational ecophobia, which is justified by the predatory behavior of the fungus and its invasion of not only Madeline but also other living creatures.

Madeline becomes the host for the fungus in secret. She lies that she does not remember what happened when she drowned, and thus allows the fungus to settle in the new environment without anyone recognizing the possible threat. Although Roderick suspects that

something has “entered” his sister, his ideas are connected to traditional superstitions: “[W]hen I hear this voice she speaks in, I begin to think of stories of demonic possession, not of illness” (Kingfisher 141). No one in Madeline’s surroundings suspects the truth because it is beyond human understanding, and Madeline’s symptoms of being infected are almost unnoticeable, especially initially. This suggests that the fungus is cunning and wants to live in the host without the danger of eradication. If we were to look at it more metaphorically, then the silent development of the fungus’s hold on Madeline, as well as its sudden bursts of control of the host and the possible danger for other characters, may be perceived as a mirror of the ecological disasters humanity faces nowadays: small changes which lead to environmental disasters on a large scale; years of neglect and destruction of the environment lead to irreversible climate change; a once hospitable Earth becomes an inhospitable environment. Humans became guests who overstayed their welcome and impaired their host, just like the fungus does to Madeline—the only difference is that Madeline was dead at the infection’s genesis and the Earth was a healthy planet, which is slowly being killed.

Only when Madeline continues to deteriorate and “survives” her brother breaking her neck is her host state discovered. Madeline reveals that even before Roderick killed her, she had been dead for over a month, and that the fungus saved her after she drowned in the tarn. Because the concept is difficult to comprehend, Madeline explains to Alex, “*Va* could get into the animals. *Va* learned *van* senses that way. I can’t imagine what that must have been like, the first time” (Kingfisher 154). She describes how the fungus learned to manage the five senses and that it was an intelligent being. As she is talking, she refers to the fungus with the use of the pronoun “*va*,” which in Kingfisher’s world has a specific reference: “*Va* and *van* are what children use before puberty, and also priests and nuns, although they are *var* instead of *van*. [...] And it’s not unheard of for siblings to refer to each other as *va* for their entire lives” (24–25). The choice of the pronoun Madeline applies can be explained twofold. She either perceives the fungus as an innocent child, which her marveling at its learning skills and lack of understanding of certain concepts may suggest, or she feels a unique connection to it, as if it were her sibling.

When Madeline is the fungus’s host, she does everything in her power to aid it. Even before the fungus enters Madeline’s body, she is its host at the Usher house because the fungus used to inhabit her maid. “My maid and I—*va*’d take over Alice and then I’d teach *van* what I could. But then Alice killed herself, that silly creature, and it got

harder” (Kingfisher 156). The dismissive tone toward the deceased maid suggests that Madeline values the fungus over human life. Because she taught the fungus before she was infected, her initial connection to the fungus should not be ascribed to her being its hostage, but rather to her being its host. When Derrida discusses the notion of unconditional hospitality, he posits: “Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is [...] a human, an animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 77). The fungus in the story symbolizes the stranger or the other—someone who does not fit into the host’s category of identity, custom, or nation. It seems that in the novella, Madeline follows the approach sketched by Derrida, as she welcomes the fungus into her home (through her maid) and subsequently into her own body without questioning the guest or the possible detrimental consequences of becoming a host.

Madeline’s fate can be seen as an example of how Estok’s ecophobia and boundary fears, along with Derrida’s concepts of absolute hospitality and hostage risk, represent the link between the psychological and ethical dimensions of the relationship between humans and the environment. Estok’s concepts foreground human unease about the environment and its perception as a hostile other whose influence needs to be controlled. This can be interpreted as reflecting the human resistance to opening themselves to the natural or nonhuman world. On the other hand, Derrida’s idea of hostage risk is part of absolute hospitality, in which one must be open to the other, even if it means risking one’s sense of security. Estok’s boundary fears can be understood as a rejection of absolute hospitality towards the environment. Ecophobia can be understood as embodying a rejection of one’s ethical responsibility to welcome the nonhuman other; instead, it can lead to the construction of defensive walls to avoid the hostage risk of ecological openness. If one were to overcome ecophobia, welcome the environmental other as a guest, accept one’s own vulnerability, and abandon boundary fears, one would be able to embrace Derrida’s ethic of hospitality. Madeline seems to have done just that. However, her openness to the environmental other comes at a price, which, in turn, fuels boundary fears in other characters, whose irrational fears become justified.

The need to welcome the fungus into her home and her body can be linked to Madeline’s role in becoming infected. In the story, the specific fungus with which the characters interact is a liminal

microorganism that can inhabit both water and organisms on land. It is only when humans or animals encroach on the aquatic habitat of the fungus that they get infected. This can suggest a dual perspective of the fungus toward hospitality: it is a hospitable host; it saves Madeline and the hares from their final deaths, but once its guests return to land, where it does not dwell, the guests turn into hosts: sometimes hospitable, sometimes not, but always without a choice to bid their new guest goodbye. This inescapability of becoming a permanent host emphasizes the strength of the environment and humans' inability to rein it in. Madeline treats the fungus as a real guest, and she explains that through death and the welcoming of the fungus into her, she finally has a purpose. All this suggests that radical hospitality has taken place as Madeline unconditionally welcomes the fungus; their relationship is transformative for both parties, and the aspect of sacrificial giving (personal or communal sacrifice to meet the needs of the other) is fulfilled as well. Fungal infection can be a metaphor for unconditional hospitality. Such a reading reinforces the idea that radical hospitality, while noble, can become a liability when it involves inviting harmful influences into one's life. However, it is not the only manner in which one could interpret Madeline's state of being infected.

Derrida claims that

absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner [...] but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 25)

Madeline's hospitality towards the fungus is in line with Derrida's definition but can the readers trust that the character's actions are autonomous and not influenced by the need for reciprocity? Madeline receives a prolonged life for continuous hospitality toward the fungus, but one could question whether she expects it and whether it is her choice. Madeline confesses that the fungus is in her brain; thus, can we fully trust that her actions are truly her own? Moreover, the fungus maintains Madeline's body because without it, as a guest, it would not have a host to govern. This taints the purity of the unconditionality of her welcome of the fungus and embodies the virtually insolvable tension between conditional and unconditional hospitality voiced by Derrida. Judith Still reminds us that Immanuel Kant saw the rights of guests as limited to visiting, not to residence (35). If one were to see it from Kant's point of view, then the fungus overstayed its welcome as it controls and consumes Madeline. Alex notices, "Maddy's control of her body

stopped at the neck. Below the break [of her neck], the tarn was controlling her body like a puppet" (Kingfisher 157). With the developing skills of the fungus and Madeline's dwindling control of her own body, she turns from a host into a hostage; as the fungus fills her from the inside, she becomes more fungus than human, thus extending her hospitality towards the other indefinitely.

When discussing "plant-becoming," Fitzpatrick indicates that "[t]he ecological epithet 'at one with nature' takes an extreme uncanny turn when human and plant entanglements are depicted as a very physical transcorporeality ... demonstrat[ing] our consistent ecophobia: being part of the food chain rather than its apex" (266). The described concept is transferable to the events in the novella. Madeline is the fungus's sustenance: "[V]a couldn't help but feed a little" (Kingfisher 157). From the outsider's perspective, the fungus did more than take a little. Alex states: "It was a horror and it had eaten my friend" (157). This is illustrative of the violence in the host-guest relations that Still observes: "External violence [...] can break in upon the hospitable home, forcing violent choices [...] [but] true hospitality shines as a peaceful beacon against aggression" (262). One could argue that the fungus's "invasion" of Madeline constitutes a violent act as the consequences of becoming a host are unknown at the time of infection, and the infection itself is irrevocable. Still admits that there is a possibility "of the host-guest relationship becoming a host parasite relationship where the guest consumes the host" (262–263). In the story, Kingfisher turns this possibility into reality as the fungus gradually consumes its host, and the host maintains the hospitable nature of the relationship. As the fungus gradually consumes Madeline, host-guest sovereignty becomes increasingly blurred by the fungus's parasitism. Although it seems that Madeline extended absolute hospitality, the violence aspect and the impossibility to deny being infected suggest that she simply could have succumbed to the inevitable and become the perfect host because it was the only choice she could rationalize (as proven by the explanations of the process she extends to others).

After Roderick kills Madeline and her body recovers but is controlled by the fungus, she becomes a guest not only in her own body but in her house as well. Roderick recalls: "I heard her knocking last night" [...]. 'On the door of the crypt,' Roderick said. 'Trying to get out' (Kingfisher 106). The act of knocking suggests the need to be let in, which in turn often coincides with the act of welcoming. Madeline is dead at the time, which raises the question: do we owe hospitality to the dead, and if so, where does one's duty end? In the observation cited earlier, Derrida claims that in absolute hospitality, it does

not matter whether the one we welcome is dead or alive. Bearing this in mind, one could argue that one's duty as a host never ends; it should be fulfilled even regarding the dead. The story does not explore in detail the act of hospitality towards Madeline in the Usher house. Still, as Roderick ensures they both perish in the fire that consumes the Usher manor, it seems that in Roderick's mind neither his deceased sister nor the fungus is owed hospitality.

Despite the extent to which the fungus makes itself at home in Madeline's body, hospitality must come to an end because the body is too deteriorated to maintain its guest. But like every good host, Madeline does not want to leave her guest stranded and attempts to convince Alex to welcome the fungus into their body.

"Maddy, are you asking me to let that thing infect me?"

"Not *infect*." She looked offended at the word. "Just give van a home. Va's like a child, va needs someone to care for van, and I know you'll protect van and stand up for van, like you always did for me." (Kingfisher 159)

The narrator is unwilling to ingest the fungus; Alex regards it as alien and as triggering terror. Derrida forewarns: "Anyone who encroaches on my at home, on my ipseity, on my power of hospitality, on my sovereignty as host, I start to regard as an undesirable foreigner, and virtually as an enemy. This other becomes a hostile subject, and I risk becoming their hostage" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 53, 55). Alex fears the fungus and treats it as an enemy who killed Madeline and thus wants to prevent it happening to themselves. It is also what happened to the maid: she killed herself as the fungus encroached on her individuality as a human being. The fear Alex and the maid exhibit is not what Estok dubbed ecophobia but rather a rational fear justified by the circumstances in which the characters find themselves. Because Madeline uses the phrasing of giving a fungus a home, readers can assume that she truly sees it as a guest, an other in need of hospitality.

The Ushers' willingness to welcome others into their home exposed them to external influences, both human and non-human, which contributed to their downfall. This highlights the dangers of hospitality if it is not balanced with self-preservation. Guests in Kingfisher's novella overstay their welcome, which leads to a tragic outcome. The fungus's prolonged presence in Madeline leads to the destruction of her body, and eventually also to her final death when Roderick Usher burns the manor and ensures that his sister and the fungus burn with it. As previously indicated, while it can be argued that Madeline succumbed to radical hospitality in connection with the fungus, she does

not do the same for her human guests. In fact, her unconditional hospitality towards the fungus puts her other guests and loved ones in mortal danger. One could postulate that the story illustrates the notion that unconditional hospitality is virtually impossible in the real world for a reason: it can have deadly consequences. Human guests remain in the mansion longer than anticipated as well. Roderick openly states that he did not expect Alex to come and that Denton was to have left before Roderick had to kill Madeline. What Roderick did not predict was his friends' need to help him. "How long did we stay? Until Roderick agreed to leave, whenever that was?" (Kingfisher 109). The narrator's uncertainty as to the length of the stay points to the unclear expectations on both host and guests' part. Because Alex and Denton choose to linger in the house, they become privy to Madeline's secret and are put in danger as the fungus needs to spread, and the house must be burned. "I thumped his back one last time and stepped away and Denton and I staggered away from that accursed house, while Roderick Usher went inside" (Kingfisher 163). The guests witness their host's return to the place of hospitality to die and to protect the others from her sister's guest. The act of self-sacrifice on Roderick Usher's part may be read as both his duty as a host to protect his guests and as an act of love for his sister—to make certain she is finally at peace in death. Just as Alex ensures Denton's rescue of an unconscious Roderick from Madeline, Usher saves his guests by prioritizing their safety over his own life. In a way, he becomes a hostage to the house, as he cannot leave it behind because of his sister's fate. When the human guests finally leave after they destroy the fungus remaining in the tarn, their hosts are dead, and the house is destroyed: "And then we drove away and left behind the dead lake and the smoldering timbers of the fallen house of Usher" (Kingfisher 169). Both the hosts and the primary place of hospitality are gone, and what remains are the guests who retain the trauma of the events. The codes of hospitality, which state that no harm should come to either host or guest, are violated as guests and hosts suffer to various extents, illustrating the dangers of hospitality.

In *What Moves the Dead*, hospitality is perverted. The novella subverts traditional notions of hospitality, showing how the invasive, uncontrollable forces of the natural world can corrupt it. The Usher house, which should be a haven, becomes a site of horror. The hospitality offered by the Ushers becomes a trap, as the invasive, fungal organism consumes the manor and its inhabitants. This inversion of hospitality reflects the broader ecoGothic theme of nature's encroachment into human spaces, impairing the boundaries between host and guest, human and non-human. Kingfisher's idea is not a revolutionary one,

as ecohorror is filled with stories of bodily possession, even by a fungus. For example, Rebecca Duncan discusses anthropocene gothic based on the film *Gaia*, in which “an ancient mycelium network has been growing beneath the forest since before humans evolved, and is now about to unleash itself on the Earth’s population in an act of retribution for the war on nature that has been waged by humanity since the industrial revolution” (116). The scale on which the fungus in *What Moves the Dead* is not as expansive as in *Gaia*, and the fungus does not specifically seek revenge and global control. Nevertheless, the moral of Kingfisher’s story, seen through an ecocritical approach, is one worth noting. The fungus’s prolonged cohabitation within Madeline can be understood as challenging the sovereignty of humans, thus pointing towards reading the story as illustrative of transcorporeal hospitality that refers to hosting and being hosted not only at the level of social spaces but also at the level of bodies. As illustrated in this article, the notion of hospitality is vast, host-guest relations never follow strict definitions and codes, and thus, hospitality is a continuous negotiation between its conditional and unconditional forms. Being a good host or guest entails something different depending on the circumstances, and as illustrated above, breaking the laws of hospitality, as well as being too hospitable, can be deadly.

Abstract: In *What Moves the Dead*, an American author, T. Kingfisher (a pen name of Ursula Vernon), reimagines Edgar Allan Poe’s well-known short story “The Fall of the House of Usher.” The novella introduces a parasitic fungus inhabiting a mountain lake that infects both animals and humans, transforming hosts into hostages, rendering the Usher manor, which stands near the infected tarn, a perilous space for its guests. This article explores the intricate dimensions of hospitality, ranging from the invitation and act of welcoming to the risks associated with overstaying one’s welcome. The concepts of “environment” and “host” are examined in their dual interpretations. “Environment” is understood both as the natural world and as the immediate surroundings of an individual. At the same time “host,” a gender-neutral alternative to “hostess,” is perceived as an individual who receives guests and as a reference to an organism on or within which a parasite resides. The brief overview of such concepts as ecoGothic, ecohorror, and ecophobia allows for the subsequent analysis to situate the examination of the host-guest relations in the ecological framework. The hospitality presented in the story mirrors human interaction with nature, illustrating that both hosts and guests may suffer dire consequences when hospitality is distorted. The article highlights the complexity of host-guest dynamics, emphasizing that the principles of hospitality are fluid and context-dependent, with potentially dangerous ramifications for both human and non-human beings.

Keywords: hospitality, ecohorror, ecophobia, T. Kingfisher, *What Moves the Dead*

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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 Drąg, 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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(UN)WELCOME IN PRISON

African American Sonneteering and the Limits of American (Literary) Hospitality

Timo Müller, the author of *The African American Sonnet: A Literary History* (2018), draws attention to the sonnet-nation analogy in William Wordsworth's "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room" (5–6). Indeed, literary genres, as sites of social, political, and cultural struggle, mirror nations. Both feature dynamic tensions between tradition and innovation, power and oppression, voice and silence. Genres, like nations, have boundaries that may be defended or transgressed, solidified or blurred. Both can help either consolidate or undermine a group's sense of collective identity. While genres and nations often contribute to one's sense of liberty, they also restrict it. Although compelling, the genre-as-nation analogy can be problematic and should be employed with caution. Unquestioned, it may lead to implausible conclusions. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of "unconditional hospitality," I will analyze whether it is plausible to argue, in line with the aforementioned analogy, that African Americans can be perceived as "newcomers" who "destroyed" the "sonnet-nation" established by white men.

Like nations, genres have their founders and places of origin. Sonneteering emerged in thirteenth-century Italy, with Giacomo da Lentini recognized as its founding father. Years later, Francesco Petrarca played a major role in expanding the genre beyond its country of origin (Cousins and Howarth 92, 100). The sonnet was introduced to England in the late fourteenth century through Geoffrey Chaucer's translation of Petrarch's Sonnet 132 into vernacular English. Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard subsequently translated Petrarch's sonnet into English, altering the rhyme scheme to ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Later, Philip Sidney produced his most significant work, *Astrophil*

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and *Stella* (1591), comprising sonnets that adhered to English and Italian rhyme schemes alongside others written in hexameter (Robbins 37). Soon, several other notable sonneteers, including Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare, came to prominence.

Müller recognizes Wordsworth's "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room" as "the most influential manifestation" of "conceiving the sonnet in spatial terms" (5–6). The poem follows a fixed rhyme scheme, is written in iambic pentameter, and features a volta that marks the shift between the octave and the sestet. Thus, it adheres to the strict formal requirements of traditional European sonneteering. These restrictions may be recognized as the poem's boundaries. Compact as it is, the sonnet resembles, as Wordsworth has it, "a scanty plot of ground." Notably, it is not just the poem's form that evokes a sense of enclosure; the content of this self-referential sonnet also brings to mind the notion of confinement. It goes as follows:

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
 And hermits are contented with their cells;
 And students with their pensive citadels;
 Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
 Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
 High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
 Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
 In truth the prison, unto which we doom
 Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
 In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
 Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
 Pleased, if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
 Should find brief solace there, as I have found. (Wordsworth 13)

While terms such as "narrow room" (line one), "cells" (line two), and "prison" (lines eight and nine) explicitly refer to the nuns' convent and its physical boundaries, they also implicitly reflect the compactness of the very sonnet form. This connection becomes clearer after the volta, when, in the sestet, Wordsworth directly addresses the genre itself. As noted, the poet intertwines imagery of confinement with themes of joy and freedom in this section of the poem.

According to Müller, the sonnet's formal constraints, paired with its expressive potential, mirror the paradoxical character of English liberty, where freedom has its boundaries (6). Such a statement encourages drawing parallels between genre and nation. Like England, one might say, the sonnet had long been a much-desired yet restrictive territory steeped in rich tradition. White men dominated both realms, shaping

and safeguarding the boundaries, be they geopolitical or poetic. Those who did not belong (e.g., people of color) were unwelcome in either realm. Once allowed entry, they were compelled to adhere to the norms set by the nation's or the sonnet's inhabitants. Many black poets agreed to assimilate. Over time, however, more and more African Americans began engaging in a critical dialogue with the well-established European poetic tradition. Their protests against literary domination translated into protests against sociopolitical inequality. Still, convenient as it may be, equating the sonnet to a prison or a country solely due to its formal limitation risks overextending the analogy, as one might feel encouraged to liken any compact or formally defined entity (be it a literary genre or not) to, for example, England or America.

Eventually, the sonnet reached various non-European countries, including the United States. John Quincy Adams, William Cullen Bryant, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, to name a few, were pioneers of the genre. Early American sonneteers often conveyed nationalistic sentiments through their poetry. Bryant's "To an American Painter Departing for Europe" is one example:

Thine eyes shall see the light of distant skies:
 Yet, Cole! thy heart shall bear to Europe's strand
 A living image of thy native land,
 Such as on thine own glorious canvas lies;
 Lone lakes—savannahs where the bison roves—
 Rocks rich with summer garlands—solemn streams—
 Skies, where the desert eagle wheels and screams—
 Spring bloom and autumn blaze of boundless groves.
 Fair scenes shall greet thee where thou goest—fair,
 But different—every where the trace of men,
 Paths, homes, graves, ruins, from the lowest glen
 To where life shrinks from the fierce Alpine air,
 Gaze on them, till the tears shall dim thy sight,
 But keep that earlier, wilder image bright. (Bryant 4)¹

Bryant's sonnet is a romantic celebration of the untamed, yet beautiful and dear American landscape. It seems ironic, though, that it employs such a restrictive form—fourteen lines, fixed rhyme scheme, adherence to iambic pentameter, volta/turns after lines eight and twelve—to capture the grandeur of its subject. The image of wild but homely America overshadows that of contained and foreign Europe. Within the constraints of the European sonnet form, Bryant delves

1 Thomas Cole (1801–1848), renowned for his Romantic landscapes and founder of the Hudson River School, was a painter who emigrated from England to America.

into the richness of his own (and the painter's) homeland. While keeping the poem's formal boundaries intact, he transcends the traditional limitations of content. Not only does he meet the basic formal requirements of the sonnet, but he even goes a step further, showcasing his mastery of this kind of formal writing. In doing so, he seems to assert, as Müller would phrase it, his claim to the "sonnet-space." His apt use of sound repetition is particularly noteworthy. Through assonance, consonance, and alliteration, Bryant subtly shapes our perception of the poem, enhancing its rhythm and, consequently, aesthetic appeal. This effect is especially palpable when the recurring /s/ and /j/ sounds evoke in readers' minds the sudden gusts sweeping across the vast American landscape.

Traversing continents, the sonnet was at the time primarily the domain of white male poets. Engaging with a socially esteemed poetic form, they were able to express their perspectives and sentiments about others freely. Robbins notes that, since black sonneteers' contributions have been largely overlooked, the form has been commonly associated with privileged, highbrow white culture (21). Over time, those who might be considered "outsiders" within the genre-as-nation analogy—including non-white, non-male, and non-heteronormative poets—have crossed the formal and thematic boundaries traditionally ascribed to the sonnet (but not imposed by the form itself). In my analysis, I focus on African American poets, who not only embraced the form but also transformed it in significant ways.

According to Derrida, unconditional hospitality requires that you "give up the mastery of your space, your home, your nation" and "accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything or killing everyone" (70–71). Historically silenced, African Americans have sought ways to articulate their opposition to the injustices they have endured. While they have attempted to voice their concerns and needs through various cultural outlets, their engagement with the sonnet form is especially noteworthy. At this point, it is again tempting to rely on the genre-as-nation analogy. Just as unwanted newcomers can be excluded from a foreign land's society, African American poets were excluded from several anthologies edited by white men (Robbins 67).² One might say that in fear of poetic exile, the early black entrants into the sonnet-

2 See, for example, Braithwaite, William Stanley and Henry Thomas Schnittkind, editors. *Representative American Poetry*, Richard G. Badger (The Gorham Press), 1916; Thornley Clarke, Jennie, editor. *Songs of the South: Choice Selections from Southern Poets from Colonial Times to the Present Day*, introduction by Joel Chandler Harris, J. B. Lippincott Company, 1896; and Griswold, Rufus W., editor.

realm usually adhered to the formal and thematic conventions set by the genre's "older inhabitants." As a result, they entered the sonnet as guests expected to obey the well-established norms.

Müller observes that those early black poets are notable for having modified (often implicitly) the sonnet form (3–4). He illustrates this with "The Montenegrin" by Albery Allson Whitman, who is regarded as a trailblazer of African American sonneteering. The poem goes as follows:

Undaunted watcher of the mountain track,
Tho' surging cohorts like a sea below,
Against thy cliff-walled homes their thunders throw;
Proud, whilst thy rocky fastness answers back
The fierce, long menace of the Turk's attack,
Thy eagle ken above the tumult flies,
The hostile plain spurns, and its prowess black,
And lights on strongholds terraced in the skies;
There thou wilt quicker than the roe-buck bound,
If bolder dangers mount to force thy pass;
But not till thou a signal brave hast wound,
That hears responses from each peak around,
And calls thy comrade clans-in-arms, to mass
In high defence, when battle stern begins —
Then who can conquer the Montenegrins? (Whitman 227–228)

The juxtaposition of "The Montenegrin" with "To an American Painter Departing for Europe" reveals that Bryant's landscape is relatively peaceful, even if wild. Whitman's space, on the other hand, is a stark battlefield. While Bryant's sonnet praises his homeland, America, Whitman's sonnet praises Montenegrins defending their homeland.³ Müller discerns implicit references to African Americans' fight for freedom in Whitman's poem (4). He notes that the poet engages with the oppressor's form, changing it into a refuge for the oppressed. Notably, "The Montenegrin" comprises fifteen instead of fourteen lines. Müller believes that the fifteenth line marks a break from traditional limitations. For analogical purposes, Whitman employs enjambment to destabilize the rigid structure of the "sonnet-prison" (4).

Throughout history, several scholars and poets have discerned parallels between the sonnet form and prison. Oliwia Loksing Moy,

The Poets and Poetry of America: With an Historical Introduction, 4th ed. Carey and Hart, 1842.

3 Montenegrins are a South Slavic people inhabiting the region now known as Montenegro. They fought numerous battles to defend their territory against Ottoman domination.

for instance, speaks of the sonnet in the context of “female confinement,” explaining:

Used by major poets of the 1800s, the Gothic trope of female confinement assumes an additional layer of meaning, where the sonnet’s form serves as a metaphor for prison itself, and the imagery of female confinement is used to justify or celebrate such prosodic structures. Through close readings of important nineteenth-century sonnets by William Wordsworth, John Keats and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, [...] [it can be seen] how the language of trapped female bodies and spatial confinement was incorporated to create a tradition of “Gothic sonnets”—sonnets that utilize imagery of female bondage as an analogy for the structural limitations of the form’s 14 lines, rigid rhyme and strict meter. (“Radcliffe’s Poetic Legacy: Female Confinement in the ‘Gothic Sonnet’”)

Debra Fried, to provide another example, also refers to female sexuality and the limitations imposed on it, as she makes the following remark on Edna St. Vincent Millay’s sonnet “I will put chaos into fourteen lines”: “In Millay’s posthumous sonnet on the sonnet, the form appears [...] as an erotic prison” (9), also observing that “the sonnet figures poetic form as a cage for a wild creature” (10). In the African American context, Robbins similarly comments on “The Turncoat” by Amiri Baraka (also known as LeRoi Jones), a prominent figure in the Black Arts Movement who criticized the use of the European sonnet form by Black poets:

Without a defined meter and rhyme scheme, Jones’s poem still embraces the sonnet form. The double-voiced, disordered, self-hating speaker of the octave broods over secret speech and ponders his own shadow, the sonnet cage evoked by the lines “locked in / with dull memories.” (173)

Referring to Claude McKay, a prominent African American poet known for his “protest sonnets,” Antonella Francini states: “In his hands, the tight cage of the sonnet ultimately turns into a dynamic vehicle for freedom and social justice” (40). These are merely a few examples that associate identity-related confinement with the sonnet form. However, any parallel between genre and identity should be read metaphorically rather than literally, to avoid ideologically overstretched interpretations. African American poets deliberately engaged with a form so often associated with confinement. While some adhered to established norms, multiple black poets have openly transformed the genre.

Wanda Coleman’s “American Sonnet 1” is not only experimental but radical in its form and content:

the lurid confessions of an ex-cake junky: “i blew it
all. blimped. i was really stupid. i waited
until i was forty to get hooked on white flour
and powdered sugar”

$$\frac{\text{white greed}}{\text{socio-eco dominance}} \times \frac{\text{black anger}}{\text{socio-eco disparity}} =$$

- a) increased racial tension/polarization
- b) increased criminal activity
- c) sporadic eruptions manifest as mass killings
- d) collapses of longstanding social institutions
- e) the niggerization of the middle class

the blow to his head cracks his skull
he bleeds eighth notes & treble clefs

(sometimes i feel like i’m almost going)

to Chicago, baby do you want to go? (Coleman 11)

At first glance, her poem resembles a peculiar mathematical equation, not a (traditional) sonnet. It has no end rhymes and does not follow the iambic pentameter. Whether it consists of fourteen lines is not immediately apparent. However, since terms like “white greed,” “socio-eco dominance,” “X,” “black anger,” “socio-eco disparity,” along with the two horizontal lines and the equal sign, seem to be contained within a single verse, the poem can indeed be interpreted as having fourteen lines. Still, identifying it as a sonnet would be difficult in the absence of its (or the whole sequence’s) title. This prompts a question of why Coleman, alongside several other poets, composes a poem deviating from sonnet conventions yet still designates it as such.

The poem’s content provides insights into the possible purpose(s) behind this choice. Unlike countless traditional European sonnets, Coleman’s poem neither features a suffering male poet lamenting his idealized beloved nor praises a cherished homeland. Sorrow and nation are indeed central to this sonnet; in this case, however, it is a sorrow voiced by a black poet, and a nation that warrants condemnation rather than praise. Thinking of the sonnet as a white canvas within a solid frame, one could argue that Coleman is a rebellious artist who shatters the frame and paints the canvas black. She redefines the art of sonneteering, one might say. In line with the sonnet-as-nation analogy, the poet can be seen as a rebellious guest who comes to disorganize or even destroy. Her unruly presence within this realm

becomes a political act, a protest. She refuses to adhere to the norms that help reproduce cultural and, by extension, socio-political inequality. Her sonnet uncovers the dark side of America.

Marilyn Nelson, another contemporary Black poet, does so even more explicitly in *A Wreath for Emmet Till* (2005), an illustrated heroic crown of fifteen sonnets, thematically and structurally intertwined. The eleventh sonnet of the sequence, for instance, goes as follows:

Trillium, apple blossoms, Quin Anne's lace,
woven with oak twigs, for sincerity...
Thousands of oak trees around this country
groaned with the weight of men slain for their race,
their murderers acquitted in almost every case.
One night five black men died on the same tree,
with toeless feet, in this Land of the Free.
This country we love has a Janus face:
One mouth speaks with forked tongue, the other reads
the Constitution. My country, 'tis of both
thy nightmare history and thy grand dream,
thy centuries of good and evil deeds,
I sing. Thy fruited plain, thy undergrowth
of mandrake, which flowers white as moonbeams. (Nelson)⁴

Like Coleman, Nelson does not idealize America in her sonnet(s). Hanging trees—emblems of lynchings turned into public spectacles and [sic!] a source of entertainment—cast long shadows over the “fair scenes” Bryant once celebrated. In Nelson’s vision, one might say, America’s “solemn streams” flow alongside streams of blood. Coleman and Nelson, among other contemporary black poets, challenge narratives that idealize the nation. Instead, they draw attention to the darkest chapters of its history. However, the question arises whether poets, such as Coleman and Nelson, can be considered “guests” at all. The answer depends on how one defines the term. Robbins notes that African American poets have not only embraced the genre but have ultimately come to dominate it (8). Their presence in this once-alien space has been long and prolific enough to allow for speaking of a distinctly African American tradition of sonneteering. In her Inaugural John Hope Franklin Lecture, Natasha Trethewey emphasized the influence of the European sonnet tradition on her writing, which piqued Rob-

4 The phrase “five black men died on the same tree” likely alludes to the Sabine County lynching of 1908, when, on June 22, a mob of white men broke into the jail and seized six Black men—five were hanged from a tree near the jail, and the sixth was shot while attempting to escape. Within 24 hours, nine Black men had been killed: five by hanging and four by shooting.

bins's curiosity. After the speech, Robbins inquired about Trethewey's decision not to acknowledge African American poets as influences despite the proliferation of acclaimed Black sonneteers. Initially puzzled, Trethewey reconsidered her viewpoint and admitted that, actually, she "received the form from Gwendolyn Brooks" (2). One thing is obvious: the Black sonnet has eventually evolved into a distinct genre. With that in mind, it becomes less clear who should be considered the sonnet's host nowadays.

Inspired by Coleman, Terrance Hayes, an acclaimed African American professor and poet, who authored a sequence titled "American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin," begins one of his "American" sonnets as follows: "I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison,/ Part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame/" (*American* 11). Through his sequence, Hayes engages in a metapoetic dialogue with the genre's tradition, likening the sonnet to a limiting, fear-inducing enclosure. It is a "prison," a "panic closet," and a "room in a house set aflame"—in short, a hazardous place one desperately wishes to escape. While challenging, the endeavor is worth the effort. The "house set aflame" may represent (unwelcoming) America, of which the sonnet tradition — "a little room"—is a part. One way to overcome this entrapment, Hayes suggests, is by reversing the roles of speaker and addressee. The powerful "I" is no longer white, and the powerless "you" is no longer black. The guard becomes the prisoner and vice versa. The title of the sequence anticipates this reversal by positioning the "assassin" as the passive recipient of their victim's poetic agency.

The form and structure of the sequence may serve as another instance. Hayes's text resembles a particular type of sonnet sequence, namely, a sonnet crown. In a nutshell, sonnet crowns are cyclical sequences that typically consist of seven or fifteen thematically and structurally inter-related sonnets. The so-called heroic crowns comprise fifteen sonnets, with the final one designated as the master sonnet. In sonnet crowns, the final verse of one sonnet also serves as the opening line of the subsequent sonnet, either fully or partly. Hayes's sequence comprises four series of fourteen sonnets each, and concludes with a "sonnet index" that features five master sonnets. Thus, there are seventy-five sonnets in total. This suggests that Hayes encompasses five heroic crowns within a single work. However, *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* significantly diverges from the strict formal (and thematic) conventions of a traditional sonnet crown. While Hayes's sonnets consist of fourteen lines, they do not follow a fixed rhyme scheme and, only occasionally, do they employ iambic pentameter. The very first poem of the sequence is a clear example:

The black poet would love to say his century began
 With Hughes or God forbid, Wheatley, but actually
 It began with all the poetry weirdos & worriers, warriors,
 Poetry whiners & winos falling from ship bows, sunset
 Bridges & windows. In a second I'll tell you how little
 Writing rescues. My hunch is that Sylvia Plath was not
 Especially fun company. A drama queen, thin-skinned,
 And skittery, she thought her poems were ordinary.
 What do you call a visionary who does not recognize
 Her vision? Orpheus was alone when he invented writing.
 His manic drawing became a kind of writing when he sent
 His beloved a sketch of an eye with an X struck through it.
 He meant *I am blind without you*. She thought he meant
I never want to see you again. It is possible he meant that, too. (Hayes 5)

Similar to Coleman's "American Sonnet 1," when considered independently from the rest of the sequence and its title, the poem would not be immediately recognized as a sonnet—at least, not a "conventional" one. Hayes points to the tragic origins of (black) poetry. It is born not of triumph but of despair, and cannot save the poet from loneliness, violence, or suffering. Moreover, no poem guarantees recognition and intended understanding. Hayes ironically contrasts poetry's uneasy history with its idealized, comforting image.

In sonneteering, as in other strictly codified genres, form and content are complementary. The former helps us better understand, reconsider, or even question the latter and vice versa. Coleman, Hayes, and other black poets employ formal and thematic innovations to speak their truths and, symbolically, assert their right to "inhabit" the sonnet. Yet, it was not the genre itself that constrained black poets in their long struggle for recognition. It would be unwarranted to attribute such agency to the genre itself and suggest that it is capable of racial discrimination. The opening sonnet of Hayes's sequence is explicitly metapoetic, directly addressing poetic tradition, and emphasizing its European roots. Notably, the poet himself provides valuable insights into the meaning of this particular, self-referential text, explaining:

I never had a favorite Phillis Wheatley or Anne Bradstreet poem. It was the language of Keats and the rhythm of Whitman, the weird obstinacy of Dickinson, that interested the young poet in me. The old English poet nodded; the experimental poet frowned. No Eliot. The old English poet and modernist poet frowned. The modernist poet interrupted, "Stevens was not a modernist." Though nearly all of them exposed their racism privately. The famous Pulitzer poet nodded. Even Whitman, it turns out. Frowns all around. I only covered half a century of American poetry with my time. I didn't leave room for reading my poems. I had not started writing the American Sonnets. Donald Trump was a few months from being elected. I grew obsessed with creating my own condensed

historical timeline of American poetry after that panel. In fact, the first poem of *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* alludes to my notion of lineage and ultimately, the influence of myth and memory over fact and history. (Watch 8)

Hayes reflects in his work on periods characterized by a pronounced “host”—(unwanted) “guest” hierarchy, highlighting the particularly disadvantageous position of women of color within the (literary) landscape of America (“God forbid Wheatley”). He critiques literary canon by reimagining its traditionally esteemed representatives as “poetry weirdos & worriers, warriors,” to cite just a few examples. The provocative language he employs challenges established stereotypes.

While many African Americans adopted the sonnet form for its transformative potential, others dismissed it as derivative and limiting. The latter advocated for fresh forms of expression unique to Blacks, such as “the antebellum sermon, spirituals, folk songs, blues, and spirituals” (Robbins 9). In the late eighteenth century, white writers became increasingly apprehensive about the rising social and economic status of black poets and their growing acknowledgment in the literary sphere (61). To safeguard the sonnet from undesirable influences, white anthologizers frequently omitted sonnets by African American poets from their collections. David Bromwich’s anthology, for instance, exhibits “conservative biases,” as it regards Frost as an exceptional sonnet writer while overlooking the significant contributions of African American sonneteers to the genre (the anthology includes merely two “Black” sonnets) (70).

Having briefly analyzed the history and evolution of the sonnet, I agree with Carl Phillips, the author of “Whose sonnet? (A Transgression)” (it is a chapter in the book *The American Sonnet: An Anthology of Poems and Essays*), who argues that the sonnet form, contained as it is, encourages revolution or, as I would rather call it, subversion. African American poets paved their way into the sonnet, but their presence within this realm has been unwelcome not only by multiple white poets and scholars, but also their Black counterparts (especially the key advocates of the Black Arts Movement, such as Amiri Baraka). Many African American sonnets (think, for instance, of Wanda Coleman’s “American Sonnet 1”) feature so many changes that one might wonder whether such poems should be called sonnets anymore. Following the spatial parallel, one could say that by transgressing the genre’s traditional limitations, Black poets have sought to challenge the oppressive boundaries of the “sonnet-nation” or, to use the other metaphor, destroy and rebuild the walls of the “sonnet-prison.” In doing

so, African Americans have been voicing their protest against socio-political and cultural restrictions they found unjust. An example here could be McKay's protest sonnet "If We Must Die." According to Müller, "[t]he example of McKay shows [...] that African American poets evoked the boundedness of the sonnet not so much to assert national or cultural belonging, as to trouble the limitations such concepts imply" (7). However, it is worth reiterating that strong reliance on the sonnet-as-nation parallel may be problematic. Poetic subversion does not equate to destruction and, as a fundamental aspect of poetic experimentation, is not unique to African American sonneteers. In fact, since its very emergence in Italy, the sonnet has been continuously adapted and transformed across time and space by poets of various backgrounds. As argued by Müller and Robbins, ultimately, Black sonneteering has developed into a tradition in its own right. There is no host to the sonnet. African American sonneteers—continuously in dialogue with the genre's tradition and, as Harold Bloom would put it, in agon with their white predecessors—have subverted and enriched rather than destroyed the genre.

Abstract: According to Jacques Derrida, "unconditional hospitality" requires that you "give up the mastery of your space, your home, your nation" and "accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything or killing everyone" (70–71). The concepts of unconditional hospitality and its inverse, conditional hospitality, apply not only to geopolitical analyses but also to literary studies. Genres and nations share several characteristics. Let us consider the sonnet. Its first "inhabitants" were White European men. The genre had well-established boundaries. Over time, however, non-white, non-male, and non-heteronormative poets have crossed the borders, demanding entry to the restricted space of the sonnet form, often called "prison" by literary scholars and poets. Like newcomers in a foreign land, these "alien" poets had long been denied their "citizenship" as sonneteers. The history of African American sonneteering perfectly illustrates this. To engage in dialogue with the genre's tradition and to question the culturally oppressive mechanisms of canon formation, Black poets have forced their way into the sonnet. Whereas many have remained within the genre's boundaries as "guests," several other African American poets have sought to transform it through formal and thematic alterations. Rephrasing Derrida, one might say that Black poets have "initiated a rebellion" within the sonnet-prison, or sonnet-nation. The question is whether African Americans "destroyed" the sonnet and what has been "the hosts" response to that "intrusion." In search of an answer, the article explores the host-guest tensions in the context of African American sonneteering, drawing upon Derrida's theory of "unconditional hospitality."

Keywords: sonnet, tradition, African American poetry, Jacques Derrida, Albery Allson Whitman, Wanda Coleman, Marilyn Nelson, Terrance Hayes

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GHOST DANCE RETOLD

From Sacred Resistance to Political Spectacle

INTRODUCTION

The systematic extermination, displacement, and marginalization of Indigenous populations across the Americas constitute one of the most devastating and enduring legacies of settler colonialism. While the specific nature and intensity of violence varied across geographic and political contexts, the cumulative demographic collapse was catastrophic. Historical estimates indicate that within two and a half centuries of Christopher Columbus's arrival in 1492, more than 90 percent of the Indigenous population across the Western Hemisphere had been decimated. This decline was driven not only by the introduction of foreign pathogens, such as smallpox and influenza, but also by deliberate mechanisms of structural violence, including forced displacement, cultural erasure, enslavement, and direct military campaigns waged by Spanish, British, French, and later, American colonial regimes (Thornton 43–45; Madley 127–130).

This vast human and cultural loss was compounded by the episodic violence inflicted through historical narration. As Simpson argues, colonial accounts of Indigenous history have often functioned as instruments of erasure, portraying Native nations not as sovereign polities but as impediments to the civilizing ambitions of European modernity (68–70). The dominant historiographical tradition has typically framed Indigenous resistance as irrational defiance and their cultural practices as archaic remnants incompatible with progress. Such narratives were legitimized through a discourse of manifest destiny and divine providence, which positioned the settler as a moral agent of history and cast the Indigenous subject as a tragic figure destined to vanish (Wolfe 390; Deloria 114–116; Dunbar-Ortiz 79; Estes 89).

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This Eurocentric historical framework not only rationalized territorial expansion but also worked to normalize systemic dispossession. It produced a discourse in which the annihilation of Native nations was reimagined as a necessary cost of civilization's advance. As Wolfe reiterates, settler colonialism is not a singular historical event but a structure premised on the ongoing elimination and replacement of Indigenous societies (388). Recent scholarship in Indigenous and decolonial studies has highlighted the need to challenge the colonialist worldview, by including Indigenous perspectives, knowledge systems, and ways of understanding history and relationships. Goeman looks at how Indigenous people have remapped the land and created their own way of telling stories about their relationships to that land, while TallBear explains how the ways Indigenous people care for each other and their environment, or the way they develop Caring Relations, will not permit settlers a future on that land. Rather than having a Land Claim, Indigenous peoples have a relationship with the land and they assert Sovereignty through this responsibility (Goeman 25–27; TallBear 26–29). Such interventions challenge both the archival biases of colonial historiography and the moral logic of erasure that continues to underwrite contemporary political and cultural narratives, such as portrayals of Wounded Knee as an unavoidable “clash” rather than a massacre.

These dominant narratives contributed not only to the erasure of Indigenous histories but also to the denial of genocide. The Sioux Nation holds a prominent place in US historical narratives due to its central role in significant nineteenth-century conflicts, including the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Wounded Knee Massacre. Historical figures like Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse are emblematic of Native resistance, though they are often interpreted through the settler lens as figures of defiance against “civilization” rather than defenders of cultural sovereignty (Ostler 182). The violent suppression of the Sioux throughout the nineteenth century that was evident in events like the Dakota War of 1862, the Great Sioux War of 1876, and the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890, reveals a sustained campaign of territorial dispossession and cultural annihilation in the past. Contemporary narratives often celebrate national integration and legal reconciliation, a framing that can obscure the enduring cultural consequences of nineteenth-century violence.

The Ghost Dance is based on Indigenous North American spiritual beliefs and practices that arose during the late 1800s due to the desire of Native Americans to restore what had been lost due to colonization. The Ghost Dance was created in 1889 when a creator named Wovoka,

a prophet of the Northern Paiute tribe, described how to create a better world by seeing it through a new moral perspective and how to create a future of peace and unity among tribes by restoring their ancestors. The Ghost Dance was adopted by several tribes, including the Lakota, and continued to evolve as the number of tribes embracing it grew (Mooney 22–45; Stewart 23–27; Kehoe 12–15). Federal law enforcement viewed the Ghost Dance as a threat and took action against those practicing it, which ultimately resulted in the Wounded Knee Massacre on December 29, 1890. Although this event marked the end of the Ghost Dance, it lives on as part of Native American history and culture and remains a key aspect of many Indigenous peoples' spirituality.

Misunderstood by white authorities, the Ghost Dance was perceived as an uprising rather than a spiritual call for renewal. The Ghost Dance movement was fundamentally rooted in nonviolence, collective renewal, and the hopeful restoration of Indigenous life. Central to Wovoka's teachings was a doctrine of peace and patience, calling for harmonious coexistence with white settlers and faith in a divinely ordained future of liberation. Nevertheless, widespread settler anxieties were amplified by the belief that participants wore "ghost shirts" believed to offer supernatural protection from bullets. These rumors, though largely unfounded or misinterpreted, contributed to the growing perception among US authorities that the movement harbored militant intentions. Although often based on misinterpretation or speculation, such beliefs reveal the deep-rooted mistrust the Sioux held toward US military forces, shaped by a long history of broken treaties, violence, and forced displacement and their need for spiritual and symbolic protection in the face of existential threat (Mooney 33–34).

There exists considerable scholarly debate surrounding the Ghost Dance's meaning and intent. Some non-Native interpretations have viewed it as a response to socio-political stress, including military defeat, ecological collapse (such as the destruction of the buffalo), and reservation life (DeMallie 386; Richardson 22; Roscigno 29). Others, like Robert Lowie, whose interpretation reflects a 1950s anthropological thought, perceived the movement as an expression of despair and aggression, asserting that adherents believed it would result in the annihilation of white society (Lowie 16). In contrast, scholars such as Omar Stewart and James Mooney contend that these interpretations misrepresent the Ghost Dance's core spiritual message, exaggerating its association with violent resistance and overlooking its primarily peaceful and devotional nature (Stewart 184; Mooney 21–24). Importantly, Lakota spiritual expression is not doctrinally uniform.

Each practitioner experiences and interprets the Ghost Dance individually, in line with traditional religious beliefs that allow for personal spiritual autonomy (Adams and Fogelson 155). As such, the accusation that the Sioux “perverted” Wovoka’s teachings by adopting a militant posture oversimplifies both the diversity and the cultural nuance of Lakota religious life. Furthermore, interpretations found in settler and US government narratives that ghost shirts were deliberately promoted by spiritual leaders to manipulate followers reflect settler anxieties rather than Indigenous intentions.

NARRATIVE TRANSFORMATION IN ADAPTATION

Dee Brown and Zimmerman are non-Indigenous authors but approach their respective histories in quite different ways. Brown presents a sympathetic portrayal of Native Americans, offering a perspective that would later lead readers to identify with Native Americans. In contrast, Zimmerman’s writing comes from a white person’s perspective, offering a concise and ideologically-focused account based on edited material and an alternate audience. Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* is widely regarded as a landmark in historical narrative for centering Indigenous voices and revising settler accounts of westward expansion. Dee Brown’s account presents a nuanced portrayal of the events surrounding the Wounded Knee Massacre, highlighting the spiritual significance of the Ghost Dance with a tone of empathy and historical depth. By contrast, Dwight Zimmerman’s *Saga of the Sioux* (2011), tailored for a younger readership, streamlines the narrative for clarity and accessibility, often at the expense of cultural and theological complexity. Presented with illustrations and accessible language, the adaptation re-narrates Sioux resistance with a focus on prominent characters and events between 1860 and 1890 (Blair 123).

These differences are a product of their respective contexts. Brown was writing in the midst of the American Indian Movement, a time when American society was becoming increasingly aware of how Indigenous peoples have been dispossessed of their lands. Zimmerman’s 2011 adaptation was written after the White-Native conflict had been resolved by legal and institutional means. Therefore, Zimmerman’s work is directed towards a younger audience than Brown’s.

While Zimmerman’s version facilitates basic historical understanding, it also necessarily involves compression and reinterpretation. This process entails the risk of reducing narrative complexity and minimizing Indigenous epistemologies. For instance, in privileging certain

characters or emphasizing dramatic events, the adaptation may inadvertently reinforce tropes of the “tragic Indian” or “noble savage,” thereby distancing readers from the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of Sioux life. Zimmerman’s editorial decisions, both in narrative focus and tone, illustrate the ideological stakes of adaptation. The title *Saga of the Sioux* foregrounds one nation within a broader history, possibly reinforcing a US-centric essentialism that treats the Sioux as a homogenous collective and thereby obscures internal tribal diversity. Moreover, framing the Ghost Dance as the central trigger for the Wounded Knee Massacre without adequately contextualizing its spiritual roots risks perpetuating the narrative of Native irrationality or fanaticism.

The question of narrative authority—who has the right or power to tell a story—lies at the heart of adaptation studies, especially when the narratives concern historically silenced or colonized peoples. Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as both “repetition and reinterpretation,” a process that inevitably reflects the cultural and ideological standpoint of the adaptor (Hutcheon 176). Far from being neutral, adaptations carry the imprint of the historical moment in which they are created and the assumptions of their intended audience. Hutcheon’s concept of “palimpsestic” narrative helps explain how successive retellings inscribe new meanings over the original, often obscuring or reframing foundational truths. Retelling is therefore not just a literary act but a political one as well. Adaptations of traumatic histories like Wounded Knee may shift the framing of events, recasting resistance as rebellion or spirituality as superstition.

Postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak have long warned against the appropriation of subaltern narratives by dominant cultures. Spivak’s well-known question—“Can the subaltern speak?”—highlights the structural barriers that prevent marginalized voices from being authentically represented within hegemonic discourses (271). In the case of *Saga of the Sioux*, the risk lies not only in narrative simplification but in reinscribing colonial hierarchies by filtering Indigenous memory through a non-Indigenous lens. Gerald Vizenor further argues that Native histories are often reframed through a settler gaze that romanticizes or flattens Indigenous subjectivity (16). This study adopts his insights to examine how Zimmerman’s version both gestures toward the Indigenous perspective while subtly redirecting narrative authority away from Native epistemologies and toward settler comprehension.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, comparative textual analysis framework, drawing on narrative theory and postcolonial literary criticism to examine how historical meaning and Indigenous representation are shaped across source and adaptation texts. The primary objective is to examine how the Ghost Dance, as both a sacred ritual and a symbol of resistance, is represented differently in Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and Dwight Zimmerman's adaptation *Saga of the Sioux*. These two texts offer contrasting narrative frameworks, authorial voices, and ideological orientations, making them suitable for exploring questions related to voice, representation, adaptation, and cultural translation.

The two texts selected for analysis were chosen based on their direct relationship as source and adaptation. Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* is a landmark historical narrative that privileges Indigenous voices and perspectives by incorporating speeches, testimonies, and biographical narratives of Native leaders. Zimmerman's *Saga of the Sioux*, designed for a younger audience, reinterprets Brown's original narrative through simplified language, enhanced visual content, and an instructive tone that prioritizes accessibility over historical and cultural nuance. The adaptation claims educational intent but necessarily involves narrative compression and ideological filtering. The contrast between these works provides fertile ground for examining how meaning shifts through the process of retelling.

The corpus of data consists of narrative segments from both texts that explicitly address the Ghost Dance movement and the surrounding historical context, particularly leading up to the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890. Selected chapters, narrative segments, and descriptive passages were systematically analyzed for their thematic significance to the Ghost Dance, with particular attention to the portrayal of Indigenous agency, spiritual expression, narrative voice, and character representation. These excerpts were organized in parallel to allow for direct comparison of narrative elements.

The selection of passages for the purposes of analysis was based on three main criteria: (1) An explicit reference to the Ghost Dance or its immediate effects, (2) the way the United States government views and responds to it, and (3) instances in which Indigenous voices or explanations or leadership are included or excluded from the discussion. Rather than relying only on individual quotes, the focus was on clusters of passages that exemplify patterns of narrative through repeated use of direct testimonials (as seen in Brown) as opposed

to summaries (as found in Zimmerman), or examples of shifting from collective to individualized blame.

The present study focuses on six key narrative elements in order to critically assess how the Ghost Dance is represented and reinterpreted in both *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and its adaptation, *Saga of the Sioux*. For the purpose of the study, the analysis focuses on the following elements: (1) narrative voice and point of view, (2) character focus and personalization, (3) the representation of spiritual content, (4) tone and emotional framing, (5) the use of quotations and rhetorical presence, and (6) historical contextualization and moral framing. Each component is essential in understanding the transformation of meaning that occurs through the process of adaptation, particularly in relation to Indigenous historical and spiritual narratives.

The analysis of narrative voice and point of view addresses who holds narrative authority in each text—whether the story is told through Indigenous testimony or mediated by an external, omniscient narrator. Scholars such as Leitch (9) and Rhonda Y. Williams (64) have emphasized that voice in historical storytelling is not merely a technical feature but a political one, as it reflects decisions about whose perspective is authorized to speak. A shift from first-person Indigenous testimony to third-person external narration, as seen in the adaptation, risks displacing Native epistemologies in favor of settler-colonial narrative structures (Lyons 64). This also impacts character focus, as personalization of key figures like Kicking Bear or Wovoka in the original text provides historical specificity and emotional immediacy, whereas their reduction to collective representations in the adaptation erodes narrative intimacy and cultural depth (Smith 91).

The representation of spiritual content is another critical area of inquiry, particularly considering the Ghost Dance's significance as a religious and cultural practice. Contemporary scholarship in Indigenous studies underscores the critical importance of preserving the sacred integrity of Native rituals in narrative retellings, cautioning against reductive interpretations that strip these practices of their spiritual and cultural significance. Settler narratives often secularize or exoticize Indigenous spirituality, transforming sacred acts into either folklore or threats (Tuck and Yang 1–2). In *Saga of the Sioux*, the Ghost Dance is portrayed less as a sacred prophecy of cultural and spiritual renewal and more as a misinterpreted or misconstrued episode, illustrating “settler common sense” that is a dominant interpretive framework that normalizes colonial perspectives while marginalizing Indigenous worldviews (Gilio-Whitaker 75).

Tone and emotional framing further mediate how the reader is invited to interpret both historical trauma and Indigenous resilience. Brown's original work is imbued with grief, mourning, and resistance, reflecting what LaRocque describes as "writing through wounds" (LaRocque 83). By contrast, the adaptation employs a neutral, instructional tone, which, while appropriate for younger readers, inadvertently minimizes the affective gravity of colonial violence. This leads to a dilution of rhetorical power, particularly in the use or omission of Native quotations. The original text preserves Indigenous oratory, giving readers access to the language and cadence of resistance. In contrast, the adaptation frequently paraphrases or excludes Indigenous voices, thereby diminishing the narrative texture and undermining what David Herman describes as "narrative fidelity"—the degree to which a narrative authentically conveys the lived experiences and cultural truths of its subjects (Herman 113).

Finally, the analysis examines how each text contextualizes the Ghost Dance within broader histories of violence and dispossession. Brown's work situates the ritual as the culmination of cultural endurance and collective despair, while Zimmerman's version frames it as a precursor to military confrontation, thereby reshaping its moral and historical meaning. This framing aligns with what Glen Coulthard describes as the tendency of liberal settler histories to narrate Indigenous resistance as irrational or tragic rather than political and purposeful (115). By critically evaluating these six narrative components, this study demonstrates how shifts in form, tone, and voice across source and adaptation not only reshape the meaning of the Ghost Dance but also reflect broader ideological tensions in the representation of Indigenous histories.

The analysis was guided by the theoretical frameworks of narrative theory and postcolonial literary criticism, which provided critical tools for examining the construction of voice, agency, and cultural representation within the texts. From the viewpoint of narrative theory, particular attention was paid to the concept of narrative authority—that is, who tells the story, from what perspective, and with what interpretive weight. The presence or absence of Indigenous narrative voice, especially in relation to sacred practices such as the Ghost Dance, was central to the inquiry. The analysis also drew on Gérard Genette's concepts of voice and focalization, particularly in tracing how narrative perspective mediates access to characters' interior worlds (Genette 186–192).

Postcolonial theory, particularly the works of Edward Said (1978) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) informed the critique of representational

politics. Said's notion of *positional superiority* and Spivak's interrogation of the silencing of the subaltern provided a framework for assessing how Indigenous voices are either preserved or overwritten in historical adaptation. Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, especially her notion of adaptation as an act of ideological re-inscription and narrative negotiation, was instrumental in identifying the socio-political implications of Zimmerman's retelling.

REFRAMING INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE

A key difference between Brown's and Zimmerman's narratives lies in narrative voice. Brown structures his text around direct testimonies and quoted speeches from Native leaders such as Sitting Bull, Kicking Bear, and Red Cloud. This stylistic choice serves not merely as a literary device, but as a restoration of voice to those historically silenced. In doing so, Brown reconstructs the history of conquest as a lived and spoken experience of grief, dignity, and resistance.

Zimmerman, on the other hand, shifts to a third-person omniscient narrator. While effective for simplifying exposition, this move distances the reader from the rhetorical power and immediacy of Indigenous speech. The adaptation no longer "hears" Native voices but "reports" them. This reflects what Spivak describes as the "epistemic violence" of representation: even when the subaltern is included, their voice is mediated through the language and lens of the dominant (284). Such a narrative shift may also reflect assumptions about the young reader's cognitive or emotional capacity. Yet this assumption risks reinforcing the hierarchy it seeks to overcome, positioning Indigenous speech as too complex or intense for broader consumption.

In Brown's original, the Ghost Dance is portrayed as a sacred ritual or an expression of spiritual continuity and collective renewal. Rooted in Wovoka's prophecy, the dance was nonviolent, hopeful, and deeply religious. Brown includes direct testimony about the spiritual teachings of peace, humility, and patience that underpinned the movement (Mooney 25). This framing aligns with Indigenous cosmologies that view ritual as a living relationship with the metaphysical world. On the other hand, Zimmerman's version reframes the Ghost Dance as a vaguely militant activity, as seen from the whites' perspective. Although he does not explicitly pathologize the dance, his omission of spiritual language and emphasis on settlers' fear changes the interpretive center. The ritual is no longer a form of sacred resistance but a prelude to political unrest.

Both the texts have the same interpretation of the Ghost Dance—a sign of submission and fear towards American troops (Brown 435; Zimmerman 167). The writers state that Ghost Dances were perceived as dangerous by American Soldiers. There are some differences in the way the Ghost Dance was described in both books:

At Pine Ridge, the frightened agent telegraphed Washington: “Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy [...]. We need protection, and we need it now. The leaders should be arrested and confined at some military post until the matter is quieted, and this should be done at once.” (Brown 436)

The excerpt quoted above is a direct quotation from Dee Brown’s book, which demonstrates an example of the perception of the Ghost Dance by white Americans. The words “wild” and “crazy” were defined by the reservation agent, which exemplifies the negative connotations that were associated with the Ghost Dance from a white American’s perspective. The resulting idea conveyed in this quote portrays the fact that the Ghost Dance was viewed as a form of submitting to white people and the threat that the Ghost Dance posed to them. The quote above shows how this fear resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of the Ghost Dance leader. The use of the word “leader” does not refer to a specific figure; it could refer to any Native American who participated in the dance.

On the other hand, Zimmerman limited the focus of the Ghost Dance:

Government agents were terrified and pleaded for military help. On November 20, the Indian Bureau in Washington, reservation agents were ordered to telegraph the names of all the leaders of the disturbances. That list was then transmitted to Bear Coat Miles’s army headquarters in Chicago. Miles saw Sitting Bull’s name and immediately assumed he was to blame. (167–168)

The quote provided does not include the word “dance,” nor does the book specifically reference the Ghost Dance. While the book clearly states that the Ghost Dance posed a threat and needed to be dealt with urgently, it excludes the terms of both the “wild and crazy” description of the dance and its participants. Rather, the book states that the dance was perceived by reservation agents to cause them fear or panic. The Ghost Dance was characterized in the book as not being reckless or insane, but rather presenting an immediate need for policing. The book identifies Sitting Bull as the person responsible for the uprising. In particular, the book appears to place emphasis on the confrontation between Sitting Bull and the representatives of the American govern-

ment. In doing so, it conveys the perspective of white Americans, who created a bias against Sitting Bull based on preconceived notions. This bias allowed for Sitting Bull's arrest by the American government.

The reframing of Indigenous spiritual practices in colonial and postcolonial narratives carries significant ideological implications, particularly when sacred rituals are extracted from their epistemological roots and recontextualized through a Western interpretive lens. Gerald Vizenor argues that the displacement of Indigenous narratives often transforms sacred expressions into stylized or anthropological representations, undressing them of their rooted ceremonial significance and severing them from the epistemological frameworks that originally gave them meaning (11). This process renders the rituals not as acts of living knowledge but as symbolic performance artifacts, often appropriated to satisfy settler curiosity or to reinforce tropes of mysticism and primitivism. The result can be understood as a form of cultural de-spiritualization, in which Indigenous cosmologies are emptied of their relational, ethical, and metaphysical meanings and subsequently reframed within interpretive model shaped by colonial rationality, often diminishing ethical significance (Smith 44; Wenger 112).

This phenomenon is particularly evident in the treatment of rituals such as the Ghost Dance, which has been persistently misrepresented as a dangerous or irrational response to colonial expansion rather than as a coherent theological system rooted in Indigenous futurity and relational ontology. Jeffrey Ostler documents how settler institutions, particularly military and bureaucratic agencies, interpreted the Ghost Dance through a lens of fear and suspicion, framing it not as a spiritual strategy of survival and renewal but as a precursor to violent uprising (Ostler 221–224). Such interpretations are not merely misreadings, but they serve to justify state surveillance and violence, thereby reinforcing colonial structures of power. In this way, the decontextualization of Native ritual becomes a discursive tool that not only discredits Indigenous religious epistemologies but also legitimizes their suppression.

Recent scholarship further elaborates on this point by linking the secularization of Indigenous sacred traditions to regimes of colonial control, demonstrating how spiritual practices were reinterpreted through legal and administrative framework that enabled suppression, surveillance, and oppression (Smith 42–48; Ostler 221–224; Wenger 110–115). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues that the state's classification of Native religious practices as either folkloric or threatening constitutes a form of epistemic violence that denies Indigenous com-

munities the authority to define the spiritual on their own terms (72–74). Similarly, Mishuana Goeman observes that Indigenous rituals, when narratively reconfigured for settler consumption, frequently lose their intergenerational and land-based dimensions, transforming into spectacles rather than expressions of living resistance (Goeman 295–300). This reduction is emblematic of what Mark Rifkin describes as “settler common sense”—the normalization of settler colonial legal, political, and affective structures as the self-evident conditions of everyday life, rendering Indigenous sovereignty and agency largely invisible within dominant epistemological frameworks (Rifkin 4–6). As a result, when sacred rituals like the Ghost Dance are abstracted from their ceremonial and cultural contexts, they do not merely lose spiritual meaning—they are re-scripted in ways that legitimize colonial historiography, undermine Indigenous sovereignty, and obscure the continuity of spiritual resistance.

The depiction of the Native American struggle provided by Brown highlights various tribal identities (e.g., Oglala, Hunkpapa, and Teton Sioux), thereby showcasing some of the internal intricacies of the Sioux Nation and the relationship of the intertribal political landscape.

Their outstanding leader was Red Cloud, thirty-eight years old, a shrewd warrior chief. Still too young to be a warrior was Crazy Horse, an intelligent and fearless teen-aged Oglala. Among the Hunkpapas, a smaller division of the Teton Sioux, a young man in his mid-twenties had already won a reputation as a hunter and warrior. (Brown 10)

In above Brown’s texts, one can find a greater level of complexity when considering the leadership of the Sioux and how they constructed their strategies for resistance as opposed to Zimmerman’s generalization below leading to a homogenized and therefore less complex portrayal of the tribes, “Their leaders included some of the most famous warrior chiefs in Indian history: Red Cloud, the Sioux’s greatest diplomat; Sitting Bull, the Sioux’s greatest strategist; and Crazy Horse, the Sioux’s greatest field general” (Zimmerman xiv).

In *Saga of the Sioux*, the protagonist is defined as “Sioux” by generalization, which includes generalised assessments of the Native American leaders. In contrast, when describing Red Cloud’s diplomacy, for instance, Brown gives one many examples of how Red Cloud operated as a diplomat. Brown uses as an illustration, Red Cloud’s encounter with President Grant at the White House; this episode illustrates the stark contrast in the style of writing between Zimmerman’s and Brown’s works. Brown’s writing is focused on illustrating historical processes and conveying political action. On the other hand,

Zimmerman's works tend to condense Native American leaders into categories of concise terms, stripping them of the historical context and the complexities associated with their leaderships.

Brown's work offers rich portrayals of specific figures like Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, Crazy Horse not merely as historical actors but as emotionally complex individuals. These figures speak, mourn, and act with agency. These narratives humanize and individualize the broader historical trauma of Indigenous genocide, transforming abstract loss into lived, personal experiences that resist erasure. Zimmerman's adaptation is an example of his placing a collective emphasis on Civilizations rather than individuals. In addition to being educational for many due to the simplification of a complex history, this stance effectively eliminates the potential for portraying the internal diversity of views held by members of the Sioux tribe. It also renders resistance abstract, thereby dulling the ethical urgency of the historical moment. This flattening of character parallels what Spivak terms "strategic essentialism," the political reduction of diverse individuals into simplified identities for the sake of visibility or critique (287). While often well-intentioned, this strategy can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes and suppress individual agency.

Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* evokes a profound emotional resonance, conveying the complexities of grief, endurance, and historical trauma through vivid narrative techniques and the inclusion of firsthand Indigenous testimonies. The language is weighted with grief, injustice, and spiritual resilience. This emotional charge is central to Brown's political project: to expose the brutality of conquest and evoke empathy for its victims. Zimmerman, in adapting for a younger audience, adopts a more neutral, informational tone. The emotional weight is softened, and the Wounded Knee Massacre is described with brevity and caution. While such a move may be intended to shield young readers from graphic content, it also sanitizes the past.

This tonal shift raises important ethical questions about historical affect: How should trauma be represented, especially to younger audiences? How much should be told, and in what way? As Hutcheon notes, adaptation always involves ethical as well as aesthetic decisions (106). In this case, the ethical cost of softening history may be the erosion of its moral clarity.

Brown's text includes frequent use of Indigenous quotations that are rich in oratorical tradition, metaphor, and spiritual vocabulary. These speeches are not merely informational; they are performative acts of resistance and memory. They allow readers to encounter

Native worldviews directly, not as filtered summaries but as living words. Zimmerman largely omits these quotations, replacing them with paraphrases or general narration. This erases a key site of Indigenous rhetorical presence. As Spivak reminds us, voice is not simply a matter of being referenced; it is about having one's form of expression recognized and preserved (285). The omission of Native quotations thus constitutes a form of discursive displacement.

SPECTACLE AND SILENCING

Dee Brown's use of first-person accounts from Native leaders such as Kicking Bear and Sitting Bull anchors the Ghost Dance within the worldview of those who experienced it. This approach foregrounds Indigenous epistemology and rhetorical sovereignty, allowing Native participants to speak from within their cosmological framework. In contrast, *Saga of the Sioux* employs an omniscient third-person narrator who describes the dance as an external observer. This narrative repositioning produces a distancing effect, in which Indigenous perspectives are mediated through a didactic and externalized viewpoint. This narrative transformation reflects what Spivak identifies as the silencing of the subaltern (285), where the Ghost Dance is no longer portrayed as an active, lived expression of Indigenous resistance, but rather recast as a passive and externalized spectacle within the dominant colonial discourse. The Indigenous subject becomes an object of narration rather than a narrator of their own story. As a consequence, the Ghost Dance loses its discursive agency and is instead interpreted within the dominant epistemic structures of Western historical explanation.

In Brown's original work, the Ghost Dance is rooted in Wovoka's prophecy—centered on peace, renewal, and ancestral return. This spiritual context is essential to understanding the dance as a non-violent form of resistance, steeped in cultural symbolism. Brown's portrayal respects the metaphysical weight of the ritual and its theological coherence within Native belief systems. The adaptation, however, reframes the dance through settler anxiety. It foregrounds whites' fears and military misinterpretations, effectively minimizing the sacredness of the movement. This reframing echoes what Gerald Vizenor describes as the manifest manner: the tendency of colonial discourse to recode Indigenous spirituality into a sign of irrationality or danger (Vizenor 4). The Ghost Dance, once a profound expression of hope and cosmological restoration, is recontextualized in colonial narratives as a perceived threat. Its spiritual intent is overshadowed

by settler misinterpretation and state-driven anxieties. The spiritual dimension, essential to its cultural logic, is thus flattened into a political event that is a precursor to rebellion rather than a sacred invocation.

Brown carefully contextualizes the Ghost Dance by detailing Wovoka's vision, including the anticipated return of buffalo and dead ancestors, and the prophesied nonviolence toward whites. This framing asserts Native motivations and provides readers with insight into how the Ghost Dance functioned as a spiritual and cultural response to existential collapse. Zimmerman's adaptation offers only a cursory mention of Wovoka's message, quickly pivoting to white interpretations of the dance as dangerous. This centering of settler response reflects a broader discursive pattern in which Indigenous actions are interpreted not on their own terms but according to their impact on the colonizer. As Edward Said notes in *Orientalism*, such centering constructs the "Other" not as a subject with agency, but as a source of disturbance within a presumed civilizational order (108). The result is that the Ghost Dance is not presented as a legitimate religious expression, but as a misinterpreted episode obscured by colonial lenses. This reframing removes the Indigenous voice from the center of meaning-making and reinforces a settler-centric narrative logic.

In *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, the Ghost Dance is a symbolic climax or a final spiritual stand against the erasure of culture, land, and life. It encapsulates a desperate hope for renewal and justice. The ritual's place in the narrative arc serves to elevate it beyond a historical event; it becomes a cultural allegory of resistance and mourning. The teachings of Wovoka on the Ghost Dance are very apparent in Brown's (435) statement, "You must not hurt anybody or do harm to anyone. You must not fight. Do right always," which echoes Wovoka as well as the emphasis placed on brotherly love, peace, etc. This doctrine calls for no other actions from Native Americans other than to do the ritual dance and sing. In essence, the Messiah (Wovoka) is believed to be able to resurrect the dead. This statement directly reflects on the followers of the Ghost Dance in regards to their practice of "a stay-still policy" or "non-resistance." They do this by dancing and singing, without any acts of violence. This quote represents the concept of surrendering to the will of the United States among Native Americans at the time of Wovoka. Wovoka taught that the way to achieve this resurrection was through submission. Therefore, the essence of the Ghost Dance as expressed in this quote is to relinquish one's resistance to the dominant culture, rather than engaging in violent resistance. Thus the Ghost Dance marks a significant change in the overall pattern of fighting that had previously occurred between

Indigenous people and the United States. But instead of continuing to resist for short term goals such as land or food, many Indigenous people viewed the Ghost Dance as a way to spiritually protect themselves through moral and spiritual resistance from the United States while seeking sanctuary within themselves (Arn 2017). Zimmerman does not include this account in his book. The lack of recognition of the Messiah's message diminishes the significance of the Ghost Dance as a cultural identity and is representative of the subservience of the American Indian to the White man. Additionally, it prohibits the establishment of the American Indian cultural resistance.

In *Saga of the Sioux*, however, the Ghost Dance is presented as one of many episodes leading to the Wounded Knee Massacre, its symbolic potency diluted. Rather than representing a unifying act of resistance, it is rendered as a misunderstood precursor to violence. This fragmentation reduces the Ghost Dance's narrative importance, shifting its function from a central act of sacred protest to a mistaken provocation within a military timeline. Linda Hutcheon's notion of adaptation as reinterpretation helps illuminate this process: the adaptor, shaped by audience and medium, chooses what to retain, simplify, or exclude (6). In this case, the symbolic richness of the Ghost Dance is sacrificed in favor of narrative linearity and pedagogical accessibility, yet at a high cost to Indigenous representation.

Brown's depiction of the US government's reaction to the Ghost Dance is explicit in its condemnation. The state's fear and ignorance are portrayed as driving a disproportionate and brutal crackdown. The narrative critiques systemic oppression and racialized violence, highlighting Wounded Knee as not merely a massacre but the culmination of decades of injustice. Using direct quotes from official sources, Brown demonstrates how fear and a lack of understanding of race influenced how the US Government reacted to the Ghost Dance. For example, Brown cites one dispatch from Pine Ridge, wherein "Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy [...]. We need protection and we need it now" (436). As shown in the example above, this spiritual expression of the Ghost Dance was reinterpreted by many as an act of war. In addition, the alarmist language indicates that the government's response to the Ghost Dance was out of proportion to the actual threat posed by Indigenous peoples, and the government ultimately arrested Indigenous leaders as a result of bureaucratic hysteria and a misunderstanding of colonial oppression as expressed in Brown's work.

In the adaptation, the government's response is framed more ambiguously. Zimmerman presents an account of the actions taken by the U. S.

government in connection with Sioux affairs through a procedure and an orderly manner. Zimmerman described how, despite their being frightened, “government agents were terrified and pleaded for military help” (167), and how governmental actions were immediately focused on procedures for identifying those who were responsible for the “disturbance” (problems). By presenting the decision-making process of governmental institutions, the author attributes blame to Sitting Bull, which serves to diminish emotion and to view the involvement of the government in the situation as a logical consequence of an event, rather than an act of cultural misunderstanding.

There is evidence of a narrative break between these excerpts. Direct quotes provided by Brown highlight the fear and prejudice that lie beneath government policies and how the government’s response to the situation is seen as an extension of colonial violence. On the other hand, Zimmerman represents the military intervention as a normal occurrence that would occur in the course of administering to any administrative concerns, which allows for a level of normalizing state authority, and therefore, the military response would be seen as part of administrative management. This creates two different images of the US government. One image presents the US government as a panicked colonial power that is trying to make sense of Indigenous spirituality, while the other represents the US government as a rational institution responding to unrest with a simplified version of history.

This narrative shift reflects what Patrick Wolfe famously conceptualized as the “logic of elimination,” grounded in the understanding that settler colonization is “an ongoing process, not an episodic event,” in which “invasion is a structure not an event” (Wolfe 388). In this framework, elimination is not solely achieved through physical violence or population displacement; it is equally enacted through epistemic and symbolic means—including historiographical omission, cultural appropriation, and narrative reframing. Recent scholarship has expanded Wolfe’s thesis to explore how this logic persists in educational materials, public memory, and media representations that sanitize colonial violence or render Indigenous disappearance as an unfortunate side effect of modernization rather than a deliberate strategy of dispossession (Mitchell 71; Gaztambide-Fernández 44–45).

By portraying settler violence as either accidental or the result of historical misunderstanding, such narratives contribute to what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang identify as the “grammar of settler innocence”—a discursive strategy through which the settler subject absolves themselves of historical and ongoing complicity in colonial domination (10–12). This ideological maneuver is especially evi-

dent in adaptations and historical retellings that frame events such as the Ghost Dance or the Wounded Knee Massacre not as systemic outcomes of settler colonial control, but as tragic miscommunications or bureaucratic errors. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues, this rhetorical softening of structural violence undermines Indigenous political claims by relegating their struggles to the realm of historical inevitability, rather than recognizing them as acts of continuous resistance to ongoing occupation (95).

Moreover, this tendency to engage with historical and contemporary narratives of settler-colonialism promotes settler futurity (Tuck & Yang 5–7), which is understood as a temporal understanding/support for the permanency of settlers and a means to represent Indigenous sovereignty as continuously delayed or already in the process of fading away. Coulthard identifies this same logic at the foundation of the state's politics of recognition (151–154). Within this context, narratives that obscure or dilute the systemic nature of Indigenous dispossession do not merely reflect interpretive error; they actively sustain the colonial present by reinforcing settler entitlement to land, authority, and historical legitimacy. The framing of Indigenous erasure as accidental or benign thus operates as a calculated ideological act affirming the one that reinforces the structural foundations of settler colonialism under the guise of historical closure and reconciliation. The Obama administration supported reconciliation efforts through events like the 2009 Congressional Apology and the Cobell Settlement (United State, Congress). These reconciliation efforts illustrate the ability of the US Government to reframe Indigenous Erasure as a history that has been recognized, but still has no legal or structural resolution, and creates a sense of closure, which legitimizes the continued existence of Settler Colonial structures through a historical narrative rather than through Decolonial Transformation.

CONCLUSION

The adaptation of Indigenous historical narratives presents significant ethical and representational challenges. While *Saga of the Sioux* may succeed in making a significant chapter of Native American history accessible to new audiences, it also illustrates the risks of narrative simplification and ideological filtering. The reinterpretation of the Ghost Dance from a sacred ritual embodying hope and spiritual renewal to a symbol of militant defiance illustrates how adaptive processes can alter meaning in ways that marginalize Indigenous voices and obscure the original cultural and theological significance

of the practice. Reclaiming narrative authority in Indigenous histories requires not only the inclusion of Native perspectives but also a commitment to preserving spiritual complexity, cultural nuance, and historical accuracy. As this study has shown, adaptations, especially of historical trauma, must be approached with sensitivity to voice, power, and context, lest they reproduce the very structures of silencing they aim to resist.

Abstract: This article investigates the transformation of Amerindian narratives through the adaptation of the Ghost Dance episode in Dwight Jon Zimmerman's *Saga of the Sioux* (2011), a derivative work based on Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970). While Brown's original is often commended for its emphasis on Indigenous perspectives and resistance, Zimmerman's adaptation, intended for a younger audience, illustrates the consequences of narrative simplification, editorial framing, and ideological reframing. This study critically examines how themes of resistance, spirituality, and cultural identity embedded in the Ghost Dance are reinterpreted, diminished, or altered in the adaptation. Employing comparative textual analysis informed by postcolonial theory and narrative ethics, the research highlights how retellings of traumatic histories, especially by non-Indigenous authors, may simultaneously preserve and distort subaltern voices.

Keywords: Amerindian narratives, Ghost Dance, adaptation, postcolonial theory, narrative ethics

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THE CONCEPT OF PROGRESS IN PRESIDENTIAL POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE UNITED STATES (1929–1935)

INTRODUCTION

The study of history can be undertaken from multiple philosophical, theoretical, and methodological perspectives. Underlying this diversity is a fundamental question: the nature of the object of study and the discipline that addresses it, both conditioned by spatiotemporal dimensions. In this article, we examine a historically significant scenario: the United States during the Great Depression and the first New Deal.

Our study addresses cultural debates within US historiography, linked to political positions and traditions, as well as to the construction of political consensus and legitimacy. Historically, the idea of progress has been central to US political culture and to society at large. The period we explore witnessed a profound transformation of the country. Hence, we expect to observe a redefinition of the concept of progress consistent with the dynamics of the time.

We focus on presidential political discourse in this period. This choice is motivated by its importance as a tool in the production of legitimacy, particularly in contexts of structural crisis and deep reconfiguration. We do not intend to assess the veracity of this discourse or to identify the true beliefs of the presidents. Ultimately, these factors are secondary to its public impact and to the ways in which it helps shape perceptions and behaviors.

A basic premise of this article is that the concept of progress, as articulated in political discourse, is not a universal category. Rather, it is a historically and contextually conditioned construct. As such, it operates within dynamic networks of relations defined by specific distributions of power. In the United States, this context has been

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shaped by complex systems of inequality, structured around cleavages rooted in class, race, ethnicity, wealth, religion, gender, and more.

Additionally, when we refer to political consensus, we do not intend to denote any—likely impossible—form of homogeneous perception, ideological preference, or behavior. We understand it as a dominant core of ideas, implicitly or explicitly accepted by the majority of a population and interpreted by individuals and groups according to their concrete material conditions, within a relatively narrow range of variation. Segments of the population fall outside that range, but they are not sufficient to destabilize the system.

The idea of progress in history has been addressed by several authors. Among the classic contributions are John Bagnell Bury (1972), who examined it as a philosophical problem from antiquity to the nineteenth century; Frederick J. Teggart (1949), who studied the relationship between progress and historical process from the seventeenth century to the first half of the twentieth century; and Robert Nisbet (1981), who understood progress as the backdrop of human history and the guiding thread of modernity.

Progress in the history of the United States has been primarily addressed by Edward McNall Burns (1973) and David W. Marcell (1974). The former identified concepts such as messianism, exceptionalism, and progress as cornerstones of American nation-building and as foundations of its international projection. The latter demonstrated that the concept of progress is vital to modern American society.

These works outline the general framework of the function of the idea of progress as one of the axes of modernity and as a central component in the formation and development of the United States. As such, it recurs in American political discourse and operates as a metanarrative of the American Dream. However, our review did not identify studies on the evolution of the concept of progress as it has been used in political discourse, particularly by presidents. This article aims to complement these classical studies by pursuing this line of inquiry.

The presidential nature of the American political model grants the head of state a central role in constructing the legitimacy necessary for the ongoing reproduction of the social order (Pfiffner). Presidential discourse is essential as a channel for communication, mobilization, and—when necessary or desired—the justification and promotion of policy adjustments. The concept of progress carries significant legitimizing potential for diverse political projects, as it articulates aspirations and opportunities.

Our study addresses two questions: were there different definitions of progress in presidential discourse during the period 1929–1935?

How can this variation be explained? We approach this study through the theoretical model of evolutionary history developed by Domínguez López (2025), drawing on works on evolutionary mechanisms by Stuart-Fox (1999) and Runciman (2009), as well as on Braudel's theory of historical time (60–106).

To examine the concept of progress, we apply methods from conceptual history: semantic and onomasiological (Koselleck 31–33). The former allows us to explore the different meanings of a concept over time, revealing a multiplicity of meanings corresponding to a changing reality. The latter examines the various signifiers through which the concept is expressed, asking how it is articulated and directing attention to the diverse terms used to express the “state of affairs” that constitutes it.

The bulk of the corpus consists of key presidential speeches: inaugural addresses, State of the Union addresses (annual addresses), and farewell addresses. These speeches encompass the presentation of government programs and the ideological assumptions upon which they are built, analyses of the prevailing situation, the fulfillment of plans and promises, updates to government agendas, and general assessments of performance and identified challenges. Several additional speeches, considered relevant to the topic, are also included.¹

The selected period represents the deepest crisis experienced by the United States since the end of the Civil War. It encompasses the presidency of Herbert Hoover and the first two years of Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR). The latter coincides with the first New Deal, when Roosevelt launched his initial program to address the Great Depression and reorganize American society.

PROGRESS AND PROGRESSIVISM

The modern use of “progress” as a key concept in presidential discourse began with the emergence of progressivism. This movement arose in the wake of the profound transformations of the late nineteenth century: accelerated industrialization, territorial expansion, the rise of the modern corporation, mass immigration, and relative agricultural decline (Whitten and Whitten). Contradictions, social conflicts, and political movements (Taggart 25–45; Hackney), along with the economic crisis of the 1890s (Davis and Cull 733–812), opened

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all speeches (both while in office and during election campaigns) are drawn from The American Presidency Project, a research resource based at the University of California, Santa Barbara. In the text, we refer to the type and year of these speeches.

space for this new project, which became associated with the presidencies of William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, and whose lasting effects extended through the presidencies of William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, and Calvin Coolidge. Notably, it drew primarily from white farmers and working-class sectors.

Progressives formulated a definition of progress in which, in addition to advancement to a higher stage of development, life and property were considered sacred rights of both the people and the nation. As Theodore Roosevelt stated in 1910, “[t]he Republic would mean nothing without a ‘true democracy,’ an ‘economic system under which every man [has] the opportunity to manifest the best that exists within him’” (Roosevelt 273). The two decades between the end of Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency (1909) and the onset of the crisis in 1929 constitute an important period that still requires further investigation. According to Neil Wynn, it is often divided into distinct phases: the prewar years—an era of activism, idealism, and reform—and the 1920s, a time of materialism, conservatism, and disconnection (xxv).

We adopt a different perspective. The continuity of the operational models of the cultural complex during those years, beyond normal fluctuations, indicates a period of relative stability—a conjuncture generated by the transition that unfolded at the turn of the century and extended until the end of the 1920s. This period was characterized by a trend toward economic growth and a return to conservatism fused with key components of progressivism. Forms of control over corporations were maintained, while a relatively free play of market forces was promoted. Personal prosperity was understood as a right, achieved through competition and maximized individual freedom, while racial hierarchies were preserved.

The postwar recession (1920–1921) was overcome in macroeconomic terms without significant structural change. At the same time, highly speculative financial markets expanded as increasing numbers of people invested in them (Faulkner 719). The belief that growth in individually owned wealth was central to progress, and that “everyone” could access the opportunities to achieve it, took hold during this period. Banks extended massive loans to support this dynamic and the Federal Reserve maintained relatively low interest rates (Rothbard 169–80).

HOOVER AND THE CRISIS

The crisis of the 1930s, a major historical turning point, is conventionally considered to have begun in October 1929. It has been extensively studied (Rothbard 1975; Bernstein 1987; Bernanke 2000;

McNeese 2010; Galbraith 1955). Evidence indicates that the stock market crash acted as a trigger for the eruption of accumulated instability. The collapse of economic indicators was only part of the problem; it was compounded by the inadequacy of the prevailing theoretical frameworks of the time to address it, the instability affecting large segments of the population—especially the loss of social mobility (Gordon 25–328)—and the unsustainability of previous political projects.² In other words, it was a structural crisis that revealed the exhaustion of the operational models that had defined the historical conjuncture and the loss of their capacity to reproduce the cultural complex.

Thus, the contradictions that gave rise to it had developed earlier. Agriculture had stagnated (Galbraith 1955), becoming subordinated to manufacturing. The latter also had its weaknesses, the most obvious being that increased profits were accompanied by stagnant wages. This imbalance, in the absence of redistributive public policies or social safety nets, limited the expansion of effective demand and, therefore, the market (Clark 106).

Stock market speculation introduced a considerable degree of instability into this mix. By September 1929, the market value of traded securities had increased significantly. Meanwhile, the two mainstays of the American economy—the steel and automotive industries—were beginning to contract (Rostow 220). This decoupling both generated and masked instability. Combined with the stagnation of agriculture and the inelasticity of aggregate demand, the crisis became inevitable. The stock market crash of 1929 was the result of accumulated contradictions that overwhelmed the capacity of the economic model to manage them.

Herbert Hoover took office in March 1929. He had been one of the leading proponents of the economic policies of the 1920s. From 1921 to 1923, he led a research committee that established what was known as a “typical business cycle”; its findings indicated that market forces restored equilibrium on their own after a crisis (Committee of the President’s Conference on Unemployment and a Special Staff of the National Bureau). In 1922, he published *American Individualism* (Hoover 1922), in which he defended what he considered the foundations of the nation. Concurrently, he served as Secretary of Commerce during the Harding and Coolidge administrations and gained renown for his lectures on trade (Foner 188–208).

2 If we broaden the scope of the study, we find processes of similar—if not greater—magnitude in other historical contexts, including the rise of Nazism in Germany. See Polanyi.

Hoover belonged to a generation of intellectuals, politicians, and businesspeople who championed classical liberalism in its earlier forms.³ As such, his works and speeches condensed a line of thought widely held among the country's elites before the crisis (Galbraith 720–25), drawing on the ideas of Adam Smith (1965) and Alfred Marshall (1920). His liberalism was expressed through three axioms: supply creates its own demand; factors that contribute to increased supply also contribute to economic growth; and the market should be regulated by individual interests (Rothbard 185–208).

In his inaugural address, Hoover articulated a view according to which, in addition to contributing to global recovery and progress after the Great War and restoring confidence in democracy, the country had, domestically, achieved the following:

[...] a higher degree of comfort and security than ever existed before in the history of the world. Through liberation from widespread poverty we have reached a higher degree of individual freedom than ever before. The devotion to and concern for our institutions are deep and sincere. We are steadily building a new race—a new civilization great in its own attainments. The influence and high purposes of our Nation are respected among the peoples of the world. We aspire to distinction in the world, but to a distinction based upon confidence in our sense of justice as well as our accomplishments within our own borders and in our own lives. (*Inaugural Address* 1929)

Hoover's reaction to the outbreak of the crisis months later was consistent with these principles. Convinced that the 1929 crash was a typical cyclical crisis, he asserted that the country would emerge from it by allowing market forces to follow their course (Annual Address 1930, 1931, and 1932). He identified himself as an heir to progressivism; however, it is evident that he differed from earlier progressives regarding the role of the state in the economy. In his second annual address, he argued that economic problems should be resolved through the autonomous operation of the economy, driven by the actions of producers and consumers rather than by government intervention. Cooperation, he maintained, should be based on each individual preserving "self-sufficiency" and seeking "methods to improve their business or service" (Annual Address 1930).

3 It should not be confused with the form of liberalism redefined in the United States during the postwar period, which more closely resembles contemporary European social democracy.

Despite this, Hoover implemented several measures, primarily targeting supply-side issues. In 1930, he held meetings with the leaders of major companies and with state governments, seeking agreements to maintain business activity and wages. He asked Congress to lower taxes, created the Federal Agricultural Board to counteract falling prices, and established the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) to provide guaranteed loans to banks, lending associations, insurance and mortgage companies, agricultural and livestock credit associations, and railroads. Efforts to sustain demand were much more limited, including the Home Loan Act, which expanded emergency loans to homeowners, and a public works program that he was unable to complete due to the banking collapse (Faulkner 726–28). Hence, in the absence of compensatory mechanisms, the impact of the crisis was deeply asymmetric, affecting different racial groups and social classes in markedly unequal ways.

Hoover's basic position did not change. As late as 1932, he stated:

On the social and economic sides, the background of our American system and the motivation of progress is essentially that we should allow free play of social and economic forces as far as will not limit equality of opportunity and as will at the same time stimulate the initiative and enterprise of our people. (Annual Address 1932)

Hoover's discourse placed particular emphasis on economic growth, which the state should not hinder through its actions, given the centrality of individual liberty. Thus, redistribution and social security were not part of his policy framework. This position appeared to be confirmed by the economic boom of the mid-1920s. The recession of 1920–1921 was seen as a brief interruption from which the economy had quickly recovered (Gordon 25–328).

The president's concept of well-being—a signifier of progress was understood as fundamentally individual. Collective well-being was conceived as the aggregate of individual well-being. This perspective reduced well-being to personal achievement and rejected the role of the state as a provider. Consequently, his concept of progress was defined as the attainment and maintenance of economic growth, individual freedom, the expansion of individual wealth, and the formal possibility of universal access to the opportunities required to achieve it (Inaugural Address 1929; Annual Address 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932). This was a classical liberal perspective, aligned with the symbolic core and dominant consensus of the pre-crisis configuration of American capitalism. Hoover's definition of progress was articulated through several key signifiers: individual freedom, (formal) equality of oppor-

tunity, the guarantee of minimum conditions of life, and the need for security.

The discourse and policies produced by the administration during the crisis reflected this logic. They expressed unwavering faith in the market's natural tendency toward stability and, therefore, in its intrinsic capacity for recovery without external assistance. They also reflected the interests of corporate sectors that favored low levels of regulation, state elites seeking to maintain as much autonomy as possible, staunch isolationists, and other groups within the American political and social spectrum. In other words, this approach coincided with that of the forces that dominated the political landscape of the 1910s and 1920s (Clements 2010; Wilson 1975). The evident disconnect from reality indicates the exhaustion of this model of thought in the context of a structural crisis and, consequently, the fracture of the consensus.

Hoover's definition of progress was built on individual freedom, self-sufficiency, and formal equality of opportunity. It operated within a framework that ignored race, gender, and class, and thus overlooked the fundamental inequalities in American society. Consequently, it did not challenge the existing social hierarchy. In practice, the African American population, particularly in the South, was effectively excluded from this definition, and legal segregation was never addressed. It was formally inclusive but materially exclusive.

The disconnection between discourse and reality revealed the exhaustion of dominant modes of thought, as part of a broader exhaustion of the models of reproduction that led to the structural crisis. This, in turn, fractured the consensus, driving a wedge between elites and the masses and triggering a broader reconfiguration of the political structure, along with the emergence of a new dominant discourse.

FDR, THE NEW DEAL, AND THE REDEFINITION OF PROGRESS

Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed the presidency in March 1933, facing the challenge of leading the country out of the crisis. He was a veteran politician with extensive experience in the workings of Washington and the complexities of American politics. He demonstrated a clear understanding of the breakdown of consensus and the ineffectiveness of prevailing methods.

He enjoyed the support of broad segments of a heterogeneous electorate that included, among others, the traditional Southern base of the Democratic Party, Midwestern factory workers hit by the Depression, farmers on both sides of the old Mason–Dixon Line who had been left behind by the economic development of the preceding years,

and the urban poor, including some traditional Republican voters (Robinson 1970; Simpson 18; Savage 103). Subsequent developments showed that he also enjoyed the support of a significant portion of the intelligentsia, particularly younger generations of academics.

During his election campaign, FDR proposed radical changes, grounded in the identification of key issues, such as the necessary regulatory function of the state and the importance of the common citizen, excluded from prosperity and severely affected by the crisis (Ryan 40–43; Roosevelt 664; Flynn 122). He promised millions of impoverished families that progress would return through a bottom-up approach, rather than the top-down model associated with Hoover (“The Forgotten Man Speech” 1932). Responsibility, he argued, had to rest with the state, and priority would shift to the working class rather than to business interests; the slogan “save the banks” gave way to “the forgotten man” (Foner 850–53). He stated:

I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people. Let us all here assembled constitute ourselves prophets of a new order of competence and of courage. This is more than a political campaign; it is a call to arms. Give me your help, not to win votes alone, but to win in this crusade to restore America to its own people. (Acceptance Speech 1932)

In other words, he offered a profound reorganization of the country rather than a simple change of government.

These proposals, along with the identification of the “forgotten man” as the archetypal target of his discourse, were deeply intertwined with the realities of the crisis ravaging the country, while also responding to significant political developments stemming from the fracture of the dominant consensus. There is strong evidence for this, particularly in the emergence of a wave of populism in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Taggart 38).

There were two major populist movements during those years. Huey Long, a Democratic politician from Louisiana who served as governor and later as a US senator until his assassination in 1935, mobilized a coalition that included Ku Klux Klan members and sympathizers, Catholics, and impoverished farmers with deep roots in the traditional South. His platform combined wealth redistribution, the rejection of Wall Street, pro-education campaigns, and infrastructure development, alongside racism and segregation (Piper 2010; Armenta et al. 1994; Heppen 2010; Temin 2008; Foner 874–75).

The second was the movement led by the “radio priest” Charles Coughlin, who was among the first to recognize the usefulness of mass media in advancing political projects (Warren 1996), a method also

employed by FDR. Coughlin and his National Union for Social Justice promoted monetary reform, the nationalization of railroads and key industries, and the strengthening of labor rights, while at the same time supporting Fascist and Nazi leaders and employing a strongly antisemitic discourse (Foner 874–75). This movement was associated with Northeastern and Midwestern working- and middle-class sectors, including a large proportion of immigrants and second-generation Americans of European descent.

Hence, FDR's candidacy and discourse were conditioned in part by the existence of strong demands for change, emerging from the erosion of the social status and living conditions of broad segments of the population. These developments mobilized sectors of the white working class, middle class, and farming communities, while simultaneously excluding other groups, particularly African Americans. The election highlighted a clash between two projects, each presented as a path to progress: on the one hand, laissez-faire and individualism, tempered by limited social policies; on the other, state intervention and demand management. Society opted for change to overcome the economic depression, though not without resistance and reluctance, as evidenced by the 15,760,425 votes cast for Hoover.

FDR's response to the crisis took the form of the New Deal. This program—and the period it named—has been extensively studied from various perspectives.⁴ More relevant to our purposes, however, is the origin of the ideas that shaped it. An initial approach suggests a connection with the ideas associated with John Maynard Keynes. However, John Kenneth Galbraith argues that Keynes's views do not appear to have directly influenced the initial formulation of New Deal policies (299–310).

Keynes visited the United States in 1934 to meet with FDR, though little is known about the substance of their conversation. Galbraith further suggests that Roosevelt was not particularly receptive to Keynes's ideas (302). The debate that took place more than a decade later at Bretton Woods (1944), concerning the postwar monetary and financial architecture (Steil 2013), reveals some of the fundamental differences between their respective positions.⁵

4 For example, Levine (1988) and Katznelson (2013).

5 For a detailed account of the Bretton Woods negotiations and the theoretical divergences between John Maynard Keynes and Harry Dexter White, see Steil. While this debate highlights important differences between Keynesian proposals and American policy preferences, a full analysis lies beyond the scope of this article.

Of greater importance was the role played by the so-called Brain Trust in shaping the program—a group of political advisors assembled for the 1932 election campaign. These included lawyers, economists, university professors, and politicians whom Roosevelt consulted unofficially on specific issues. Among its most prominent members were Raymond Moley, Rexford Tugwell, and Samuel Rosenman, later joined by Adolf A. Berle, Joseph D. McGoldrick, and Hugh S. Johnson (Roosevelt 66–67).

As Galbraith notes,

... two key Washington officials, Marriner Eccles, the highly competent banker from Utah, who would go on to become head of the Federal Reserve Board, and Lauchlin Currie, a recent Harvard professor who was Keynes's deputy director of research and later Roosevelt's economic advisor (and, still later, a prominent victim of McCarthy's persecution), had independently arrived at similar conclusions to Keynes's regarding the appropriate direction of fiscal policy. When the General Theory appeared, they both interpreted it as confirmation of the direction they had proposed. (Galbraith 302)

Adolf A. Berle had been developing his own study of the role of the state in the economy since the 1920s. In collaboration with Gardiner C. Means, his research—focused on the 200 largest companies in the United States—concluded that state regulation was the most effective means of controlling abuses by large corporations (Berle and Means 1933).

The evidence indicates that FDR aligned himself with a segment of the American intellectual elite that interpreted the 1929 crisis as the exhaustion of classical economic liberalism and recognized the need to develop policies responsive to new conditions. This perspective stood in open contradiction to that of intellectuals committed to the preceding consensus, of whom Hoover was the clearest example.

According to Harold U. Faulkner, "A major crisis, whether economic or political, usually accelerates changes in a society that has never been static and forces the acceptance of new points of view and long-overdue reforms" (712). The crisis of 1929 was a case in point. On the one hand, it catalyzed a shift in mentality; on the other, it prompted FDR to articulate a rhetoric that expressed a clear intention to bring about change. His campaign rhetoric and his speeches from the White House aligned with progressivism in several ways: he appealed to inherited values and to the well-being of citizens, and employed powerful terms such as unity, action, change, and sacrifice (Inaugural Address 1933; Annual Address 1934, 1935). This inheritance was also evident when he criticized the "old political guard" for defending only the interests

of the country's most powerful corporations (Annual Address 1934, 1935), describing them as a self-seeking generation lacking vision and upholding a "worn-out tradition" (Inaugural Address 1933; Annual Address 1934). Later, when accused of being a "communist" or "socialist" for promoting state intervention, FDR responded by invoking the country's progressive tradition (Annual Address 1936, 1937).

Yet his discourse was even more radical, asserting that progress could be achieved only if social value were placed above monetary gain (Annual Address 1934, 1935). Beyond the immediate assertion of the supremacy of the moral over the economic, this vision reversed the terms of the relationship between the collective and the individual, emphasizing the social interest as a whole. The difference from earlier progressivism was further reinforced by the scope of his proposals, the existence of a defined theoretical framework, and the development of formal instruments, largely derived from the ideas and work of the Brain Trust.

Despite opposition from the Supreme Court during his first term, FDR found support in Congress—controlled by Democrats after the 1932 election—for the passage of a series of laws, concentrated in the first hundred days of his presidency and targeting the country's main problems, and complemented by executive policies that implemented and reinforced them. Among the most important pieces of legislation were the Glass-Steagall Banking Act (1933) and the Muscle Shoals Act (1933). The latter is known for creating the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which became widely recognized for generating employment and managing the nation's natural resources through a state-led corporate structure that financed and promoted cooperatives in economically depressed areas.⁶

The Roosevelt administration paid particular attention to the problem of employment, especially during its early years, when unemployment was at its peak. FDR linked this issue to the population's responsibility to the state and to the moral fabric of the nation (Inaugural Address 1933; Annual Address 1934, 1935). Furthermore, the "forgotten man" remained central to his discourse, reflected in his advocacy for farmers, workers, and other sectors vulnerable to economic collapse (Annual Address 1933, 1935). This is also evident in the pressure placed on employers to maintain wages and avoid layoffs. In his rhetoric, economic growth was accompanied by an increase in workers' purchasing power—two factors he considered interdependent (Annual Address 1934, 1935).

6 For a critique of those policies, see Brinkley (133–144).

The redefinition of progress implemented by FDR assigned a central role to the state and emphasized collective welfare. However, it did not entail a complete rejection of social inequality. In particular, his discourse made little or no reference to racial inequality. Regardless of Roosevelt's intentions—which, as noted earlier, fall outside the scope of this study—his discourse primarily addressed white audiences, especially working- and middle-class Americans identified as the “common man.” Although New Deal policies did improve conditions for African Americans to some extent, they were not explicitly included in the discourse. Thus, the apparent universality of that discourse ultimately preserved the racial hierarchy.

FINAL IDEAS: INTERPRETING SHIFTING MEANINGS

The evolution of American society prior to 1929 produced a definition of progress based on the synthesis of the progressive project with economic and political liberalism. Within this framework, economic growth was the primary objective, coupled with individual liberty. This implied that the democratic and liberal state was responsible for guaranteeing the legal framework and justice without interfering in economic and social management. With its various nuances, this definition formed an integral part of the political consensus at the core of the American cultural complex before the crisis.

The pre-crisis definition of progress became disconnected from reality, acting as a centrifugal force on the political consensus. It is significant that the definition articulated by Hoover remained essentially unchanged during his years in the White House. Presidential discourse thus reveals the inability of dominant epistemic constructs in the period leading up to the crisis to adequately interpret the situation and generate viable responses. In Koselleck's terms, the concept retained its meaning while distancing itself from a transformed state of affairs. In other words, the symbolic dimension of the crisis of the 1930s was expressed, among other ways, through the disconnect between lived reality and the conceptual frameworks employed by the administration. FDR and the New Deal emerged as an alternative. As such, they had to address, among other things, two key challenges: consolidating a framework for their government program and building the legitimacy necessary to achieve the consensus required to stabilize the country.

The same fluidity is evident in the various nuances introduced into the definition of progress, particularly in the role assigned to the state in its promotion and/or guarantee. This reflects the provisional nature of both the definition itself and the political program and conceptual

apparatus employed by the president and his administration, as well as the compromises inherent in that process.

The definition of progress absorbed influences from the work of intellectuals who questioned the viability of free trade and its political implications, while also drawing on elements of earlier progressivism. Furthermore, it incorporated into its semantic structure the demands generated by accumulated structural changes and the rupture produced by the crisis. As a result, it assumed a more inclusive character, grounded in a collective concern for guaranteeing the security of citizens through their conscious participation and the managerial role of the state. This transformation entailed a redefinition of both the signifiers and the semantic core of progress.

We thus observe two clearly distinct proposals: the residual core of the previous configuration and an alternative vision of what that configuration should become. The former was overwhelmed by the transition; the latter was shaped to manage it. In this context, the concept of progress transformed its meaning as texts and contexts were integrated into an evolving construct responsive to a changing reality.

The concept of progress thus functioned both as a tool of political legitimation and as a contested normative horizon. However, its apparent—and perhaps intended—inclusiveness remained in tension with an array of cleavages embedded in the social hierarchy that were largely left unaddressed, foremost among them racial divisions. Through the lens of conceptual history, these tensions indicate that the transformation of the definition of progress was driven by structural changes, but operated differently across social groups. The coexistence of universal meanings and exclusionary practices implies a relative dissociation between discourse and the historical experience of certain subordinated groups. Moreover, it suggests that not all segments of the population were included, or at least not equally included, in the intended audience.

One possible interpretation is that the concept of progress itself is incapable of encompassing all members of a deeply segmented, hierarchical society in which lines of fracture and cleavages respond to different factors. The semantics of the emerging discourse (FDR's) incorporated collective aspirations, while its articulation in specific messages preserved the existing hierarchy. The position of African Americans in this context reveals the limits of the political consensus pursued through this discourse and the incompleteness of the social inclusion it promoted. Consequently, the emerging dominant consensus—and with it the evolving configuration—preserved significant components of its predecessor. Racial hierarchies remained part

of the core that took shape during the 1930s, and the definition of progress that structured the new presidential discourse reflected this continuity from its inception.

Abstract: This article examines the redefinition of the concept of “progress” in US presidential political discourse during the Great Depression and the first New Deal (1929–1935). Applying methods from conceptual history (semantic and onomasiological) alongside an evolutionary history framework, we analyze the speeches of Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Hoover articulated a classical liberal definition of progress centered on individual freedom, self-sufficiency, and formal equality of opportunity—a position that became disconnected from the structural realities of the crisis, thereby fracturing the existing political consensus. In contrast, Roosevelt constructed an alternative definition that assigned the state a central managerial role, emphasized collective welfare, and prioritized the “forgotten man.” However, both definitions preserved racial hierarchies, excluding African Americans from full discursive inclusion. The article argues that, while the concept of progress transformed in response to structural change and functioned as a contested tool of political legitimization, its apparent universality coexisted with—and did not dismantle—deeply embedded social inequalities.

Keywords: progress, presidential discourse, Great Depression, New Deal, political consensus, racial hierarchy

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THE PRAGMATIST VISION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"

1. INTRODUCTION

"Young Goodman Brown" (1835) may be Nathaniel Hawthorne's best-known short story, associated with one of the writer's chief preoccupations: America's Puritan past. In it, Goodman Brown, an exemplary member of the Puritan community, one night leaves his wife, Faith, to meet the Devil in the forest and returns a changed man after seeing the pious inhabitants of his town participate in a black mass. The tale has been analyzed countless times, but it still provides fertile ground for interpretation: it may be read, among others, as Hawthorne's commentary on the Puritan obsession with sin, as an exploration of the internal demons of the human psyche, or as an allegory of losing one's faith. Moreover, since the story does not settle whether Brown is right about his neighbors' hypocrisy, scholars tend to either argue in favor of the reality of Goodman Brown's vision or see in it a dangerous illusion.

Not only "Young Goodman Brown" but Hawthorne's work in general still enjoys great critical interest. The unfading popularity of Gothic studies contributes to the writer's central position in research on nineteenth-century American literature, a perfect illustration of which may be the special issue of the *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* titled "Hawthorne's Gothic" (2012), edited by Monika M. Elbert and Bridget M. Marshall. Apart from the genre-driven interest in its Gothic dimension, Hawthorne's oeuvre has recently been analyzed mainly in terms of its entanglements with the writer's contexts: political (such as class, race, and gender) and historical. Important examples of such scholarly works include two collections of essays: *Hawthorne and the Real: Bicentennial Essays* (2005), edited by Millicent Bell, and *Nathaniel Hawthorne*

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in *Context* (2018), edited by Monika M. Elbert, as well as Michael J. Colacurcio's book *Hawthorne's Histories, Hawthorne's World: From Salem to Somewhere Else* (2022). Analyses of "Young Goodman Brown" itself reflect similar critical tendencies: they focus on the tale as a perfect example of the Gothic (as is the case in Michael Cody's 2012 essay "As Kinsmen, Met a Night': Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne as American Gothic Romancers"), or as an expression of Hawthorne's interest in the Puritan past (e.g., Bruce R. Magee's "Faith and Fantasy in 'Young Goodman Brown'" from 2003, John Ronan's "'Young Goodman Brown' and the Mathers" from 2012, or Michael J. Colacurcio's chapter "Puritanism" from the abovementioned volume *Nathaniel Hawthorne in Context*). Interest in the philosophical dimension of Hawthorne's work is scarce—a noteworthy exception is John E. Alvis's *Nathaniel Hawthorne as Political Philosopher: Revolutionary Principles Domesticated and Personalized* (2012), which, however, has a very different focus than my essay, as it deals with the writer's connection to the American political tradition.

In this paper, I look at Hawthorne's short story through the prism of William James's philosophy of pragmatism in general, and his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) in particular, which allows me to understand better the narrator's final comment about the impossibility of deciding whether Brown's vision was true or not. I treat Hawthorne's approach to truth in this story as a proto-pragmatist one. When he describes Brown's religious experience, he is more interested in its outcomes for the protagonist's (and the community's) life than in its origins. Therefore, I argue that the seemingly central question of the story: whether Brown discovered the truth about the townspeople's evil nature, or whether he projected on them his own evil impulses, eagerly believing the Devil when it comes to the sins of others but not examining his own conscience, is, in fact, irrelevant.

2. PRAGMATISM AND AMERICAN ROMANTICISM

Looking for pragmatic elements in a Romantic writer's work is not unusual. The most well-known example of such a writer is Ralph Waldo Emerson, considered by many scholars to be a forerunner of pragmatism. This affinity is especially evident in the similarities between his thought and William James's, on whom he exerted a profound influence both as a family friend (and James's godfather) and as a philosopher who, despite his idealism, highly valued the sphere of practical action. Stanley Cavell sees Emerson's resemblance to pragmatists chiefly in his interest in "the common, the familiar,

the low, the near” (Cavell 215). One might add that both Emerson and James have a similarly subjectivist approach to truth (which will be elaborated on later in this paper): James’s argument for seeing a given idea’s usefulness as the criterion according to which it should be judged reminds one of Emerson’s “if I am the devil’s child, I will live them [my impulses—J. F.] from the devil” (Emerson 33). Neither writer believes in an “objective,” absolute test for ideas. Instead, they advocate utility or personal integrity as determinants of their validity. What is more, Emerson adds in the passage quoted above: “[t]hey do not seem to me to be such,” claiming that though his impulses may in fact come from the Devil, they are far more likely to be of godly origin, which is why they can be safely trusted (33). James shares Emerson’s optimism, believing in a “presumed harmony between our subjective interests and the objective world” (Myers 455)—he, too, assumes that his method is not fraught with the danger of relativism.¹

As a result of these similarities, it is easy to conclude, like Frederic Carpenter, that “[w]here Emerson was content to put forward an idea in general, literary terms, James often took the same idea, defined it more exactly, verified it by scientific methods, rephrased it, and gave it new currency” (Carpenter 458). Such affinity between the two thinkers is also seen by David M. Robinson, who in his 1999 book *Emerson and the Conduct of Life* traces a shift in Emerson’s thinking from idealism and transcendentalism towards pragmatism, thus explaining how this similarity could have occurred despite James’s empirical and anti-absolutist orientation. Jonathan Levin in *The Poetics of Transition* (published in the same year) sees Emerson as a proto-pragmatist in terms of what he calls his “paradoxical poetics of transition”—a focus on change as the most pronounced characteristic of reality, which Levin attributes also the works of pragmatist philosophers (William James, John Dewey, George Santayana) and later inheritors of pragmatist esthetics such as Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens (ix).²

At the same time, Cavell goes to great lengths to warn his readers against seeing Emerson simply as a proto-pragmatist (an effort shared by James Bense’s article “At Odds with ‘De-Transcendentalizing Emerson’”). He calls Emerson only “contentiously” a pragmatist (Cavell 216), insisting on the differences between the Romantic writer and his

1 Frederic Carpenter, too, sees a similarity between James’s pragmatism and Emerson’s passage about the “Devil’s child” (see Carpenter 466).

2 For a more exhaustive list of research dealing with Emerson as James’s precursor see (Bense 355).

alleged descendants. Cavell fears that reading Emerson as a forerunner of pragmatism “blurs the particularity, the achievement, of Emerson’s language” and is, in fact, a “repression” of his importance for American thought (7, 222). To prevent pragmatism from cannibalizing Emerson’s uniqueness, he stresses that while James and Dewey may be indebted to Emerson, they certainly do not contain him (216). Cavell’s point, however, does not change the fact that the similarities between Emerson and James (Dewey to a lesser extent) allow one to see the former as a herald of this first distinctly American philosophical movement. Can the same, though, be said of Nathaniel Hawthorne? Hawthorne’s artistic temperament and vision of human life were very different from Emerson’s; while the traditional division of American Romantics into the optimistic Transcendentalists and pessimistic Dark Romantics can be seen as an oversimplification, it is true that the two writers had very dissimilar views on religion and man’s position in society—two aspects relevant for the discussion of spiritual visions. However, I argue that despite these differences, the understanding of what counts as true experience in “Young Goodman Brown” allows one to see the story as foreshadowing—from a different vantage point than Emerson’s essays—the ideas of William James.

3. A PRAGMATIC READING OF “YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN”

“Young Goodman Brown” may be read as prefiguring the pragmatist approach to religion in particular, and towards truth in general. This contention, however, depends on one’s understanding of the main focus of the story. Jane Eberwein lists the many different interpretations scholars have given it over the years. It has been seen as

an allegorical revelation of human depravity, [...] a symbolic study of sexual initiation, [...] an inquiry into generational conflict, [...] a demonstration of Puritan hypocrisy, [...] evidence of Hawthorne’s sympathy for Puritan values, and [...] an artfully designed short story making no essential reference beyond itself. (Eberwein 23)

She, in turn, believes its gist to be a false conversion: “the awful revelation that Goodman Brown’s marriage to Faith has brought temporary happiness but not a sanctifying transformation of the natural man”—which is undoubtedly true from the theological point of view (26).

Leo B. Levy explains that, in psychoanalytic terms, the tale may be read as one “about the defeat of the id by the ego and the superego,” Brown being unable to accept the evil within himself and thus repressing it (379). The critic’s main interest, however, is the protagonist’s relation-

ship with his wife. Levy claims that while “[t]he last paragraph turns Brown into an object lesson; [...] as is often the case with Hawthorne’s tales,” the story’s true point is expressed well before its ending—and that is, for Levy, the realization that “there is no necessary connection between our critical need for faith and the responsiveness of faith” (386). The fact that the scholar believes the ending to be unimportant stems from the fact that he reads it as a relatively conventional lesson against despair: its point being, for Levy, to show the devastating psychological consequences of a constant search for sin in other people. While this interpretation is certainly correct, I believe that this is not the most interesting aspect of the final paragraphs. What is central for the discussion that will follow is the fact that the narrator wonders whether Goodman Brown’s experience was a reality or a dream, and does not answer the question, instead commenting: “Be it so if you will; but, alas! It was a dream of evil omen for young Goodman Brown” (Hawthorne, “Young” 288). How one should treat the ontological status of Brown’s experience, and whether it is at all relevant, is directly connected to how Hawthorne sees religious experience in the tale.

What happens to Brown is by no means unequivocal: the story seems, on the most basic level, to offer three possibilities: either Brown dreams about the whole event but treats it, mistakenly, as reality, or he indeed has a vision, whose nature, however, is unclear. On the one hand, it may be brought about by the Devil, who misleads Brown into believing that the inhabitants of his town are all evil; on the other hand, Brown may be granted access (by God?) to the truth about the townspeople’s hypocrisy. Many scholars tend to lean toward one of these three interpretations and dismiss the rest; others believe that it is impossible to decide which option is correct (see Mosher 6). Harold Mosher shows how this uncertainty is rooted in the very way the story is constructed. The constant switches of point of view between Brown’s and the narrator’s confound the “realistic/objective” and the “allegorical/subjective” perspectives and make the reader unable to decide whether Brown is, in the end, praised or condemned by the author (7, 15).

What is more, some scholars see the narrator’s doubt about the reality of Brown’s experience as shared by the protagonist; according to them, Brown dies in despair not because he thinks that he has seen the true nature of his neighbors, but because he “loses the ability either to trust the evidence of his senses or to dismiss it completely” (Magee 8). The text, however, does not claim straightforwardly that the source of Brown’s suffering is doubt; the only reason for believing that the protagonist is not sure about the trustworthiness of his vision is that, as David Levin argues, “[i]f he were certain that they [the townspeople—J. F.]

had been present in the forest, he would not treat them even so civilly as he does during the rest of his life” (351).

While early twentieth-century critics tended to trust the content of the vision and read the tale as criticizing Puritan sanctimony, at least since the 1950s, there have been more interpretations that assume Brown is too quick to judge others based on “spectral evidence” (see D. Levin 344; Eberwein 27). Thus, for instance, David Levin sees only two ways of understanding Brown’s experience: it is either a dream, or “a reality that is unquestionably spectral,” and he rules out the possibility that the townspeople are indeed Devil-worshippers (D. Levin 352).³ The scholar believes that Hawthorne’s purpose was to “reveal the faultiness of Goodman Brown’s judgement,” since the protagonist is oblivious to the fact that the vision is presented to him by the Devil and, thus, that the specters he sees are not real people (345, 344). Levin, however, can reach so clear and unequivocal conclusions only by virtue of ignoring any passages from the tale that would testify to the contrary, in which the narrator describes the forest scene as if he were speaking of independent reality and not of Brown’s thoughts.⁴

Levin’s seeing Brown as decisively mistaken stems from the fact that he reads the tale as a Puritan story, and stresses that false visions were an important problem in Puritan theology: the Devil was seen as able to “impersonate innocent people” to mislead others, which is why Cotton Mather warned against believing “specter evidence” (D. Levin 346). What is more, Bruce Magee adds that even evidence coming from God could, according to the Puritans, be spectral, so even if the source of Goodman Brown’s vision is not the Devil, he could still be wrong (Magee 9). Such readings, however, disregard the fact that Hawthorne was not a Puritan writer and neither is his story a Puritan one—in any case, not only. For sure, Goodman Brown is a product of his society, and his imagination has been furnished by elements

3 Levin’s reading, however, destroys the story’s ambiguity, which seems to be its point. A useful way of thinking about Goodman Brown’s problem would be referring to the hauntological understanding of specters as not conforming to the presence/absence or being/non-being divide (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 63). As Edyta Lorek-Jezińska and Katarzyna Więckowska put it, the specters’ “presence cannot be fully acknowledged, yet it cannot be denied either” (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 9), which is why the story’s reader can never truly reduce it to Levin’s alternative.

4 For example, when among those gathered in the forest the narrator enumerates “high dames well known to her [the governor’s wife—J. F.], and wives of honored husbands, and widows, a great multitude, and ancient maidens, all of excellent repute, and fair young girls” (Hawthorne, “Young” 285), no phrase suggests that this is a description of specters rather than real people.

important to his culture. This is why his obsession with the townspeople's hidden sinfulness may have served Hawthorne as a handy metonymy for the Salem witch trials (Bromwich 153). At the same time, though, as Eberwein points out, the world created by Hawthorne in the story is not really Christian: it is devoid of grace or any hope for salvation (30). Even if Brown is wrong from the start in thinking that his marriage to Faith has made him spiritually safe, real Puritans believed that a mistaken conversion could still be followed by a real one.

In effect, not only Levin but most critics offer a Puritan reading of the story, trying to pinpoint the nature of Brown's experience. The need to decide whether what he sees in the forest is a dream, a vision sent by the Devil, or a vision sent by God is very much like the need to know whether one's conversion has been real. Magee stresses the importance of epistemology for Calvinists and their constant state of suspension between certainty and uncertainty as a characteristic feature of their religious life (8). The Puritans kept wondering whether they were of the elect or not, and so do scholars look for certainty about Brown's credibility or lack thereof. While the Puritans, however, would indeed need to know for sure the nature of Brown's vision, Hawthorne has a much more modern view of religion—which, I argue, foreshadows pragmatism—in making his narrator state that this dilemma is in fact irrelevant.

Those who are inclined to believe that the protagonist just dreams the whole thing face a double challenge: first, as Levy points out, the story does not lend itself perfectly to this interpretation, since it is not clear when exactly the dream would start (385). Second, and more importantly, such reading does not change anything, since the content of a dream could still be true. From a religious point of view, there is a whole tradition including prophetic dreams in the Bible and the dream in *Pilgrim's Progress* which suggests that dreams may be God's means of communicating with people about waking reality. A secular interpretation brings us back to Jamesian pragmatism: from this perspective, too, even if Brown falls asleep and the forest scene is merely a product of his unconscious, this does not necessarily make its message false. As James puts it, "it is logically conceivable that *if there be* higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so *might be* our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them" (James, "Varieties" 223, emphasis in the original). In other words, the unconscious may well mediate between God and humans, allowing us to experience something "more" than the world accessible to senses (Myers 473). In this sense, the psychoanalytic reading, which stresses that Brown's journey into the forest is an immersion

in the labyrinth of his own unconscious, does not preclude the possibility of seeing his vision as relevant to objective reality.

Whether we see Brown's vision as "true" depends, of course, on the definition of truth we refer to, and I argue that the story's narrator, by focusing on how witnessing the scene in the forest changes the protagonist's life, refers in this case to what we might term a proto-pragmatist conception of truth. For James, what really matters in determining an idea's truthfulness are its practical consequences, since a thought always leads us to forming a belief, which, necessarily, influences our actions (Myers 294). A thought is "true" if it is useful, or adaptive: if it allows us to function better in the world. As Gerald Myers points out, "[b]ecause James often equated utility with subjective satisfaction," he has been criticized repeatedly for "remov[ing] all external constraints on truth" (302–3). However, James does not mean by his stress on utility to contradict physical reality; a thought will never be "useful" if it ignores the said constraints. What is more, the pragmatic approach to truth is applicable only in the case of "metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable," that is, when there is no other way of settling them (James, "Pragmatism" 506).

Religious experience is, for James, such a case, since there is no satisfactory "objective" way to prove or disprove it. As he states in "The Varieties of Religious Experience," even God's existence cannot be proved by philosophical arguments, which may only "corroborate our preexistent partialities" ("Varieties" 394); similarly, attempts at intellectually proving the truth of a religious experience are, in his opinion, "absolutely hopeless" ("Varieties" 408).⁵ According to James, religion has more affinities with feelings than intellect, since many people "possess the objects of their belief, not in the form of mere conceptions which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended," which, therefore, cannot be disproved through argumentation ("Varieties" 387, 64). Even the source of a given experience is not a criterion of its credibility. While "medical materialists" tend to explain away mystical experiences as having a psychopathological ground, for James,

5 A similar approach may be seen in philosophy of religion to this day. Thinkers who assume the impossibility of independent verification of religious experience use the "doxastic practice approach" to accord the individual a right to believe their own religious experience if it is not clearly unreliable. What is more, the "argument from perception" states that what can make religious experience valid are, among other things, its consequences in the life of the person who has experienced it, which is further proof that James's views find continuation among contemporary philosophers of religion (see Gellman 153–54).

such an argument does not prove anything. He claims that we tend to believe certain facts not because of the origin of our knowledge, but because we have a natural inclination to believe them or because we think that they are useful (“Varieties” 19–26). This last point is true not only of religious beliefs, but of human knowledge in general; James’s pragmatism is not interested in causes and “*first things*” but rather “*last things, fruits, consequences, facts*” (James, “Pragmatism” 510, emphasis in the original). Similarly, in his essay “The Will to Believe,” James contrasts his empirical attitude with that of the “scholastic,” stating that his own system is not centered around the origin but the outcome of a given thought (468).

If we apply the pragmatic understanding of truth to “Young Goodman Brown,” the objective “truthfulness” of the protagonist’s experience (that is, whether the vision is sent by the Devil or God), as well as its source (whether it is a dream or not), becomes irrelevant.⁶ What matters are its consequences—that is, how it changes Brown’s (and the community’s) life. The narrator of the tale in all probability does not believe that “evil is the nature of mankind” and that all the townspeople are indeed Devil-worshippers; however, this fact loses its significance in the face of Brown’s individual experience (Hawthorne, “Young” 287). Brown’s reality after the forest scene becomes *as if* all the villagers were indeed Devil worshippers: he is unable to view them differently and to regain trust in their integrity. Looking at the consequences of the fateful night, for Brown, the townspeople *are* indeed evil. The forest vision has influenced not only his life but that of the whole community: in all likelihood, the change in Brown does not go unnoticed, as after his death “they carved no hopeful verse upon his tomb-stone” (Hawthorne, “Young” 289). Given Hawthorne’s interest in how society rids itself of individual anomaly expressed in the short story “Wakefield,”⁷ we can imagine that Brown’s alienation does

6 One might note here that another perspective from which the source of Brown’s vision is irrelevant could be the poststructuralist one. Suffice it to think of Derrida’s *différance*: the way Goodman Brown produces meaning is not by referring the signs (his vision) to any external reality, but to the chain of other signs he already has at his disposal (such as the Puritan vision of humans as either saints or sinners) (see Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 10–13).

7 In “Wakefield,” the eponymous character leaves his wife for twenty years only to spy on her from an adjacent house. When, after this time, he decides to go back home, the narrator ends his tale with Wakefield crossing the threshold of his former house and leaves the consequences of his disappearance open, but he also expresses serious doubt as to the possibility of Wakefield’s ability to occupy anew the place in life which he vacated, calling him an “Outcast of the Universe” (147). One might argue that Goodman Brown makes the same mistake as Wakefield:

not allow him to reclaim the same place within the social order which he occupied before leaving Faith. In this sense, the devilish nature of the townspeople becomes the truth not only in Brown's subjective experience, but for his family and neighbors too. His beliefs shape the reality of the community, who, in turn, by being unable to produce evidence to the contrary, confirm the reality of his thoughts in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Eberwein speaks of the "internal reality" of Brown's experience, but, from a pragmatist point of view, there is no difference between "internal" and "external" reality if there are no facts which could unequivocally disprove one's internal experience (26). In a sense, as Levy puts it, in the story "reality is entirely subsumed by the consciousness of the protagonist" (376). This formulation, however, can be misleading, as it still assumes a separation between "reality" and "consciousness." For James, no such division exists: "Reality is apperception itself [...]. [T]he content of the physical is none other than the psychical. Subject and object confuse, as it were" ("The Notion of Consciousness" 186). In this sense, for Brown, there is no alternative "objective" reality in which the townspeople are pious Puritans; the only reality we can speak of is the one in which he is as miserable as if they were evil, and his close ones end up spurned as if they indeed worshipped the Devil. In terms of consequences for their lives, there is no difference between "in fact" and "as if": between things really happening and people behaving as if they happened. Pragmatically speaking, therefore, Brown's vision is as true as can be, since "[t]ruth happens to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events" (James, "Pragmatism" 574, emphasis in the original). It is Brown's later life that makes his vision true, not its divine, devilish, or psychological origin.

4. CONCLUSION

One could be tempted to think that some aspects of James's pragmatism force us to give up on the story's ambiguity and to see Brown as undoubtedly mistaken. After all, James focuses on the practical consequences of ideas because in his view "the function of knowledge is to facilitate a satisfactory adaptation to the environment"

he believes that one can suspend normal life (for twenty years or for just one night) and that the world will wait for us frozen and unchanged. This, however, is impossible: in Wakefield's case, the external world has managed to readjust to his absence; in Brown's—it is he who has changed irrevocably. James writes about the inability of those who have recognized evil to return to previous naïve happiness ("Varieties" 146); Brown is affected by a similar inability, and nothing can be the same in his life after his encounter with the Devil.

(Myers 293). For him, truth is but a tool, “*the expedient in the way of our thinking*” (“Pragmatism” 583, emphasis in the original). Does this not mean that Hawthorne’s tale is, if anything, anti-pragmatic? If we treat Brown’s vision as “knowledge,” it is easy to doubt its usefulness for the protagonist. This, however, will depend on what we mean by “adaptation to the environment.” If the purpose of knowledge is to make us happy, then Brown’s notions about the townspeople are rather “maladaptive”—he ends up miserable and isolated, unable to enjoy the relationship with his family and neighbors. James’s conception of utility does not mean, however, that knowledge in the pragmatic sense needs to lead us only to pleasant conclusions. There can be, after all, “true” or “useful” knowledge of an unpleasant reality. Therefore, Brown’s final unhappiness may be seen as simply this: unhappiness, not as a proof of his incongruity with his reality. Brown may well be wrong in his judgment of the townspeople’s true nature, but he may also be correct and devastated by the discovery of this truth; a pragmatic approach does not preclude either interpretation. What it does, however, is shift our focus from the true/false vision debate onto what seems to really matter to the narrator: Brown’s individual religious experience and how his world is influenced by his ideas. The fact that Hawthorne wrote the story in such a way as to make it impossible for the reader to decide whether Brown’s vision was a dream or not is not simply (or not only) a literary device used to keep the tale’s meaning ambiguous—a technique according to which initial polarities, here the polarities of illusion and reality, “begin to merge and become entangled with one another” (Coale 2). It is also a way of showing that one’s subjective experience may shape one’s objective reality to such an extent that the boundary between the subjective and objective becomes no longer a useful distinction.

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Abstract "Young Goodman Brown" has been read, among others, as Hawthorne's commentary on Puritan obsession with sin, as an exploration of the internal demons of the human psyche, or as an allegory of losing one's faith. Moreover, since the story does not settle whether Brown is right about his neighbors' hypocrisy, scholars tend to either argue in favor of the reality of Goodman Brown's vision or see in it a dangerous illusion. In my paper, I look at Hawthorne's short story through the prism of William James's philosophy of pragmatism in general, and his "Varieties of Religious Experience" in particular, which allows me to understand better the narrator's final comment about the impossibility to decide whether Brown's vision was true or not. I treat here Hawthorne as a proto-pragmatist, who, describing Brown's religious experience, is more interested in its outcomes for the protagonist's life than its origin.

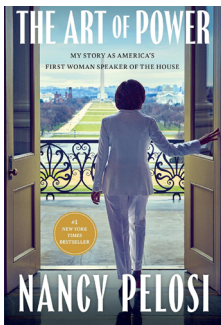
Keywords: Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown," William James, religious experience, pragmatism, truth

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THE ART OF POWER—MY STORY AS AMERICA'S FIRST WOMAN SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

by Nancy Pelosi
(A Book Review)



The Art of Power: My Story as America's First Woman Speaker of the House is an autobiographical narrative that recounts the speakership of Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and her leadership of both the US House of Representatives and the House Democratic Caucus. The book opens by tracing Pelosi's path to the speakership, emphasizing the negotiations, alliances, and institutional constraints that shaped her development as a legislative leader. It then turns to her engagement with key foreign policy debates over the course of her career, followed by an analysis

of major domestic policy challenges she confronted while in office. The narrative concludes with a retrospective assessment of her political career and her understanding of her own legacy as a national leader.

Pelosi's objectives as an author in this volume can be understood as threefold. First, she seeks to outline the personal, familial, and ideological influences that have shaped her political worldview and her understanding of public service. Second, she offers a retrospective account of her eight years as Speaker of the US House of Representatives and more than a decade as Minority Leader, situating her leadership within the major policy confrontations and institutional conflicts that defined her tenure. Finally, the narrative functions, at least in part, as a defense of her political record and public persona, addressing longstanding criticisms while frequently attributing responsibility for political failures to her opponents within the broader power structure. Beyond these aims, the book consistently frames Pelosi's career through the lens of gender, reflecting on her experience as a woman operating within a historically male-dominated political

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environment and emphasizing the structural barriers and glass ceilings women encounter in Congress—often more formidable than those faced by their male counterparts.

Pelosi emphasizes that her identity as a woman and her upbringing as a Catholic constitute two of the most significant influences on her political career. She presents herself as a forward-looking policymaker, repeatedly framing her legislative priorities in terms of responsibility toward future generations. Drawing on her background as a party organizer, she argues that the effective exercise of power requires as much strategic attention as the process of acquiring it. At the same time, she acknowledges that political visibility and authority carry personal costs. The book is dedicated to her husband, Paul Pelosi, who was violently attacked in their home in 2022, an incident that became the subject of politicized mockery by some of her opponents (Mahdawi). Pelosi uses this episode to underscore the emotional strain and personal vulnerability associated with high-level political leadership, portraying the speakership as a role that demands constant tact while generating profound personal and political frustrations.

The author places sustained emphasis on her role as a woman leader operating within what she characterizes as deeply patriarchal political institutions. She recounts multiple instances in which her authority was questioned or minimized by colleagues both inside and outside Congress, including an episode during the 2007 financial crisis in which her right to convene a meeting was openly challenged despite her position as the sitting Speaker. One of the central insights she derives from these experiences is that women's political survival depends on a clearly articulated sense of purpose—a personal “why” that sustains resistance to entrenched structural inequalities. Without such motivation, she argues, women are unlikely to persist against institutional inertia and gendered power asymmetries. Pelosi situates her own career within a longer lineage of female political leadership, paying tribute to figures such as Lindy Boggs, Sala Burton, and Barbara Boxer, whom she identifies as formative influences. She also notes the significant increase in women's representation in Congress over the course of her career and describes her speakership as a symbolic culmination of earlier feminist struggles, recalling moments in which she felt herself accompanied by the presence of past generations of American feminists. For Pelosi, the responsibility of women in positions of power lies not only in governance but also in mentorship, encouraging broader female participation in political life while fostering diversity of perspective alongside unity of purpose within legislative institutions.

In her discussion of former US presidents, Pelosi consistently frames historical evaluation in ways that reinforce her own policy positions. She criticizes George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton for what she characterizes as insufficiently assertive approaches toward China. Her assessment of the George W. Bush administration is markedly more critical, citing its alleged disregard for the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, its justification for the Iraq War, and what she views as a premature declaration of success in Afghanistan. She further faults the administration for its handling of the 2007 financial crisis, arguing that its reliance on short-term, piecemeal measures failed to address underlying structural problems. By contrast, Pelosi's treatment of the Barack Obama administration is notably favorable. She portrays Obama as an actively engaged executive who worked closely with Congress and facilitated major legislative achievements, including the passage of the Affordable Care Act. This depiction stands in sharp contrast to that offered by Obama's Republican counterpart in the House, John Boehner, who characterizes the president as aloof, condescending, and inflexible in his legislative approach (Boehner 117–149).

Substantial portions of the book are devoted to Pelosi's relationship with Donald Trump, whom she portrays in sharply negative terms. She characterizes Trump as habitually dishonest, citing early meetings in which he asserted that he had won the popular vote in the 2016 election and later reversed his support for legislation he had previously endorsed. Pelosi further presents Trump as a significant departure from his immediate predecessors, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, whom she implicitly positions as more credible stewards of executive authority. She assigns Trump primary responsibility for the events of January 6, 2021—during which she herself was a central target—as well as for the attack on her husband. Pelosi openly defends her role in both impeachment proceedings, framing her actions as necessary efforts to uphold constitutional accountability. By contrast, her discussion of Joe Biden's presidency, which coincided with the final phase of her speakership, is notably affirmative, emphasizing what she identifies as significant legislative accomplishments, most prominently the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021.

Critical readers should remain attentive to the narrative partiality that characterizes many autobiographical and biographical texts, particularly when their subject is a polarizing political figure such as Nancy Pelosi. In addition to the evident partisan and personal biases that shape the narrative, the book raises several substantive analytical concerns. Most notably, Pelosi's discussion of the American congressional system at times reflects a limited engagement with the structural

logic of bicameral governance, despite her extensive institutional experience. She repeatedly expresses frustration with the White House and, in particular, with the Senate, which she portrays as slow-moving and procedurally antiquated. What remains largely unacknowledged, however, is the extent to which the Senate's deliberative complexity functions as a stabilizing mechanism, constraining extremist policy initiatives and mitigating the influence of fringe political agendas. Pelosi further criticizes presidents for what she describes as a Senate-centered legislative orientation, arguing that executive support more frequently aligns with Senate versions of bills. Yet she gives comparatively little attention to the structural differences between the two chambers: House legislation is often broader in scope, more ideologically driven, and more responsive to short-term political pressures, thereby requiring modification and moderation in the upper chamber. Senate versions of legislation are consequently more likely to secure presidential backing and eventual passage, not merely as a matter of political preference, but because they tend to reflect broader coalitional consensus within the American electorate.

One of the most consequential limitations of the book lies in its consistently hagiographic tone. Throughout the narrative, Pelosi offers little sustained self-critique, rarely acknowledging error or misjudgment across a long and often contentious political career. This tendency is also evident in her rhetorical asymmetries when addressing international conflicts. For example, she explicitly employs the term "genocide" in reference to the treatment of Uyghurs in China, while describing the situation in Gaza in markedly more attenuated terms as "suffering" (2–4), a formulation that obscures questions of agency and political responsibility. Such linguistic caution is not contextualized within the text, despite Pelosi's long-standing relationships with pro-Israel advocacy organizations across the political spectrum, including AIPAC and J Street (Samuels).

More broadly, the memoir avoids engagement with several persistent controversies surrounding Pelosi's public image and political practice, including allegations of insider trading that have circulated widely in public discourse (Boyer). While Pelosi presents herself as a proponent of consensus-driven governance and intra-party democracy, numerous observers and political interlocutors have characterized her leadership style as highly centralized and strategically coercive, emphasizing her formidable control over legislative outcomes and party discipline (Boehner 1–4; Remnick). Long associated with both the Baltimore and San Francisco political establishments, Pelosi has frequently functioned as a symbolic figure of the "West

Coast liberal” elite. Her orchestration of the passage of the Affordable Care Act exemplifies this approach: the legislation’s success depended on tightly managed procedural maneuvering and disciplined party alignment, underscoring a model of leadership that prioritized results over deliberative inclusivity.

Pelosi similarly foregrounds her role in the Democratic electoral victories of 2006 and 2018, while devoting comparatively little attention to the party’s losses in 2010 and 2022. Even after relinquishing formal leadership positions, she continues to exert substantial influence within the Democratic caucus, now led by her chosen successor, Hakeem Jeffries (Kramer and Brennan). Notably, moments of self-celebration in the text often inadvertently illuminate Pelosi’s instrumental understanding of power. Her account of attaching the repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy to a must-pass military spending bill—described approvingly as “kaleidoscope coalition politics” (48–49)—reveals a legislative strategy grounded in compulsion and leverage, recalling the procedural pragmatism long associated with Lyndon B. Johnson’s mastery of congressional politics.

Pelosi presents a clearly articulated perspective in this memoir, offering insight into her legislative style, policy priorities, political decisions, and carefully cultivated public persona as one of the most influential and contested figures in contemporary American politics. As a first-person account by arguably the most powerful woman in US political history and one of the most consequential Speakers of the House, the book holds considerable value for scholars of American governance, legislative leadership, and political communication. Although the narrative is unmistakably selective and self-affirming, its perspective remains distinctive, capturing the view from the apex of institutional power—a vantage point still relatively rare in American political discourse. Much like its author, *The Art of Power* ultimately functions as a revealing case study in the construction, performance, and maintenance of political authority, offering insight not only into Pelosi’s career but also into the broader dynamics through which political leadership is imagined, enacted, and remembered.

Abstract: *The Art of Power* is an autobiographical account by Nancy Pelosi, the first woman to serve as Speaker of the US House of Representatives. The book traces her political trajectory from early campaign work to her tenure as Speaker, situating her legislative career within broader debates about leadership, governance, and gender in American politics. Pelosi reflects on her political philosophy, legislative experiences, and self-conception as a woman operating within a historically male-dominated institution, emphasizing how she understands her approach to power as distinct from

that of many of her male colleagues. This review offers a critical assessment of the gender dynamics and partisan conflicts that shape the narrative, while also engaging with the book's achievements and limitations. In particular, it examines patterns of selective self-representation, strategic framing of political conflict, and the relative absence of sustained self-critique. Despite its strongly performative and self-affirming tone, *The Art of Power* can be read as a valuable ethnographic document of political authority and feminist leadership within contemporary American legislative structures, offering insight into the exercise of power in an increasingly polarized democratic system.

Keywords: American politics, US Congress, House of Representatives, Speaker of the US House, Nancy Pelosi, book review

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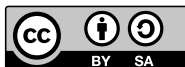
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