

HOSTS, GUESTS AND PARASITES IN HELENA MARIA VIRAMONTES' "THE CARIBOO CAFÉ"¹

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Abstract

The correlation between immigrants and parasites is a common theme in political discourse. The nation-state assumes the role of a living organism that allows the entrance of an alien, a guest of sorts, who, in turn, endangers the wellbeing of the host. Such is the initial vision of the migrant woman in Helena Maria Viramontes' "The Cariboo Café" (1995). Drawing from Michel Serres, Jaques Derrida and Mireille Rosello, this article analyses the story from the perspective of the hospitality framework. The figure of the parasite appears as a liminal figure that establishes a symbiotic relationship with the host both on the social and the linguistic levels. As a disturber of peace and order, the parasite disrupts the traditional relations with the abused guest. In the story, the café owner's gatekeeping activities, both linguistic and ideological, become suspended. The opposition between host/guest-parasite, legal/illegal, inside/outside opens to an infinite range of possibilities between alleged polar opposites.

Keywords: parasite, hospitality, hostility, immigration, guest, host, chicano.

Resumen

La conexión entre los inmigrantes y los parásitos es un tema recurrente en el discurso político. El estado-nación asume el papel de organismo vivo que acepta la

entrada de un organismo ajeno, una especie de invitado, que pone en peligro el bienestar del anfitrión. Esta es la imagen de la mujer inmigrante en la historia de Helena María Viramontes “The Cariboo Café” (1995). Este artículo se apoya en las propuestas de Michel Serres, Jacques Derrida y Mireille Rosello para analizar el relato utilizando la teoría de la hospitalidad como marco de referencia. La imagen del parásito emerge como figura liminar que establece una relación simbiótica con el anfitrión tanto en el plano social como lingüístico. Como agente que perturba la paz y el buen orden, el parásito desestabiliza la imagen tradicional del huésped como sujeto maltratado. En el relato, las funciones del dueño del café como vigilante fronterizo, tanto en el plano lingüístico como ideológico, quedan canceladas. Los pares binarios anfitrión/invitado-parásito, legal/ilegal, interno/externo se resquebrajan y dan lugar a un abanico indeterminado de posibilidades entre los presuntos polos opuestos.

Palabras Clave: parásito, hospitalidad, hostilidad, inmigración, huésped, anfitrión, chicano.

Our collective is the expulsion of the stranger, of the enemy, of the parasite. The laws of hospitality become laws of hostility. Whatever the size of the group, from two on up to all human kind, the transcendental condition of its constitution is the existence of the Demon.

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

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The hospitality of countries towards migrants and refugees has become a major concern in contemporary political discourse. Defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “the act or practice of being hospitable; the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers, with liberality and goodwill”, hospitality has made a comeback at a time of mass migrations and forced relocations. For Tahar Ben Jelloun hospitality is “the act of taking somebody into one’s home without any thought of recompense”. Three aspects are involved in the ritual, for there is an action (a welcome); an attitude (the opening of oneself to the face of another); and a principle (disinterestedness) (1999: 1-2). This opening out towards the guest is not totally disinterested, as Jelloun explains, for “entertaining a guest is something that both honors and humanizes the host. [...] and also] makes the guest recognize me, the host, as someone capable of sharing” (1999: 2). The guest “makes me confront myself. He upsets my space and my habits and teaches me what I am. It’s a kind of test” (1999: 3). Levinas has explained that the Other or *xenos* brings “a certain disquietude, as a derangement which puts us out of our common tracks” (Waldenfels 2002: 63). For Derrida, the *xenos* or foreigner “shakes up the threatening dogmatism of the paternal *logos*” and contests “the authority of the chief, the father, the master of the family, the ‘master of the house’” (2000b: 5). Astride the home or *chez soi* on the one hand and the outside on the other,

hospitality opens the self to the unknown. Hospitality therefore situates itself at the heart of a tension, for the welcoming of the Other is an act that constitutes both individual and communal or national identity: "It is the act through which the home —and the homeland— constitutes itself in the gesture of turning to address its outside" (McNulty 2007: viii). This narrative of opening, however, runs counter to the rejection of the Other as an essential process of identity building. The expulsion of the other, portrayed as the stranger, the enemy or the parasite, is deeply embedded in our consciousness, as Michel Serres explains. There will always be some groups that will be envisioned as hosts while others will be imagined as temporary visitors, guests, or simple parasites that need to be expelled or chased out.

This article explores the encounter between a well-established host or café owner and a guest-parasite in Helena Viramontes' "The Cariboo Café", a story included in *The Moths and Other Stories* (1995). There is no welcoming of the tired masses in the story, and the verses engraved on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty have become ostensibly obsolete. Hospitality is not depicted as the welcoming of the Other, as an opening that tests the individual and/or communal identity. As a result of the accidental encounter between self and Other, the former "can also become unhomely, *unheimlich*, estranged by the introduction of something foreign that threatens to contaminate or dissolve its identity" (McNulty 2007: viii). This threatening exteriority of the Other fits the vision of the immigrants as depicted in the story. Subsumed under the category of guests or parasites, the immigrants are envisioned as freeloaders always ready to parasitize on the generous host country. Viramontes' story has elicited a wide variety of critical responses. Sonia Saldívar-Hull has analysed the text from a feminist perspective (1991); Saldívar has concentrated on the liminal features of a narrative "built on a series of multiple border crossings and multilayered transitions" (1997: 99). Saldívar-Hull and Saldívar agree with Barbara Harlow that the aesthetic crossings of the story in terms of plot, structure and the time-space axes reflect the challenging of the ideology of national borders and "its agenda of depoliticization in the interest of hegemony" (Harlow 1991: 152). Another set of critics focus on the arrival rather than the crossing. Carbonell portrays Los Angeles, the setting of the story, as inhospitable to survivors (1999: 59). Dean Franco offers a nuanced reading of the workings of the border in the story. Franco portrays the border not only as a contested site of oppression situated on the contours of the United States, but also within America. The border is "a *version* of America" (2002: 125). More recently, Hamilton has analysed the story in conversation with city spaces in a post-liberal or fortress LA (2011: 47). Drawing from Michel Serres' *The Parasite* and Mireille Rosello's *Postcolonial Hospitality*, this article examines Viramontes' story from the perspective of the hospitality framework. It argues that the category of the alleged

parasite appears fuzzier and vaguer than initially thought. Both the host and the parasite seem to be part of a symbiotic relationship that dismantles stable categories and establishes new forms of exchange.

I. Hosts, Guests and Parasites

There are some black spots in language. The field of the host is one such dark puddle. In the logic of exchange, or really instead of it, it manages to hide who the receiver and who the sender is, which one wants war and which one wants peace and offers asylum.

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

Astride identity and relation, the figure of the host is, indeed, a black spot in language. The host and the guest share not only the spaces of hospitality but also the intrinsic continuity between the two categories. As Benveniste demonstrates, the concept of hospitality is grounded on two different families of words, “one evoking the notion of ‘reciprocity’, the other the seemingly opposed notion of ‘personal identity’” (McNulty 2007: ix). The Latin *hospes* is made up of the elements *hosti-pet-s*, where two different roots —*hostis*, meaning “guest” or “host”, and *pet*, meaning “master”— converge (McNulty 2007: x). This bifurcation at the heart of hospitality is applicable to the figure of the host, which splits between host and guest. Not in vain, in French, the word *hôte* refers to both host and guest, as Derrida explains:

The *hôte* who receives (the host), the one who welcomes the invited or received *hôte* (the guest), the welcoming *hôte* who considers himself the owner of the place, is in truth a *hôte* received in his own home. He receives the hospitality that he offers in his own home; he receives it from his own home—which, in the end, does not belong to him. The *hôte* as host is a guest. (Derrida 1999: 41)

Another black spot in language, it is possible to claim, is that of the guest, a figure that etymologically and conceptually partakes of the position of the host yet may slip into the position of the parasite. Immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are often envisioned as guests of the host nation-state (Cf. Molz and Gibson 2007: 8). The inadequacy of the immigrant as guest metaphor has been explored by Mireille Rosello in *Postcolonial Hospitality*. Immigrant workers, the critic clarifies, are not to be regarded as guests for they are simply hired (2001: 9). When a country invites immigrants it is not because that country is being unconditionally or infinitely hospitable. If the migrant’s stay is regulated by a time frame or a contract, there is no reason, argues Rosello, to identify the nation-state as a house. The “so-called hospitality of nations”, the critic suggests, “may more closely resemble commercial hospitality”. Given this clarification,

Rosello continues, it seems more accurate to imagine the state as the place where commercial hospitality takes place, that is, as a hotel (2001: 34). Logically, the notion of the hotel versus the private house changes the nature of the guest: "Recognizing that the foreigner is locked in a commercial logic with the so-called host nation would at least allow cultural commentators to articulate a description of the immigrant as 'paying' guest" (2001: 35). Although the concept of paying guest dismantles the image of migration as an uncontrollable tide or invasion at the threshold of the nation-state, the image of the migrant as parasite crystalized in the American imaginary throughout the 20th century. The discourse of nativism, from Proposition 187 in California to campaign promises in the 2010s,² create the image of the immigrant as parasite sponging off the welfare of the United States. All kinds of social illness, from this perspective, can be attributed to invasive foreign bodies (Inda 2000: 47). J.X. Inda, for example, traces how nativist rhetoric has transformed the Mexican immigrant in particular into a parasite intruding on the body of the host nation, "drawing nutrients from it, while providing nothing to its survival and even threatening its well-being" (2000: 47). The nation-state is thus depicted as a living organism that gracefully and generously allows the entrance of an alien, a guest of sorts, who in turn endangers the wellbeing of the host, transformed into an abused and endangered host; or, more precisely, into a hostage. The alien Other, the stranger, and the immigrant, Inda states, "are often construed as threats to the integrity of the nation" (2000: 48). The alleged parasitized country is a particular kind of nation-state, based on a stable vision of who is always at home and who is not. Racialized nativism, from this perspective, creates the image of the immigrant as a threat to the welfare of the population. According to this rhetoric the immigrant always gains in the exchange, where the host nation-state always loses (Inda 2000: 51), for immigrants are customarily depicted as unstoppable waves of parasitic aliens "set on (ab)using our social services, refusing to 'assimilate', and adding to the crime and social pathologies" (Suárez Orozco in Inda 2000: 50) of the countries they arrive at. However, just as the *hôte* in Derrida's formulation is both welcoming and at the same time hosted or received in his own home, we would like to mobilize the apparently parasitic relationship between host and parasite, between nation-state and immigrant. The host receives the hospitality in his/her own home, from a home that does not belong to him/her. The nation-state as host may also be a parasite, to go back to Derrida's *Adieu*.

But what is a parasite? As defined by the Online Etymology Dictionary, a parasite is "a hanger-on, a toady, person who lives on others", from Middle French *parasite* (16c.) or directly from Latin *parasitus* "toady, sponger", and directly from Greek *parasitos* "one who lives at another's expense, person who eats at the table of another", from noun use of an adjective meaning "feeding beside", from

para- “beside”, and sitios “food”. “Para”, J. Hillis Miller explains, is an antithetical prefix “signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something inside a domestic economy and at the same time outside it, something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold or margin, and also beyond it, equivalent in status and also secondary or subsidiary [...]” (1979: 219). This ambiguity at the linguistic level echoes in the liminal position of the parasite, in and out, occupying a space that dispels the traditional opposition between outside and inside. Originally, Miller remarks that the parasite was another guest sharing food. Later on it evolved to refer to a professional dinner guest who never gave dinners in return (1979: 220). For Michel Serres “a parasite is an abusive guest, an unavoidable animal, a break in a message” (2007: 8). To the biological and sociological meanings Serres adds a third (which we can call “parasitic”) element, “a break in a message” that triangulates the alleged abusive interaction between host and parasite, noise, as I describe later. The philosopher draws from the rich semantic field of the word *parasite* in French to claim that in all communication noise and parasites are “elements that cannot be defined negatively as impurities simply to be excluded but are, in fact, fundamental elements to be integrated into the definition of any relational system” (Schrift 2014: 183). What does a parasite do? For Serres, it makes noise, produces toxins, inflammation, fever. In short, it excites the milieu” (2007: 144) and creates a new balance: “The parasite straightens things out, creating an irreversible circulation, a meaning, making meaning” (2007: 185). Both host and parasite create a new exchange and order through a new symbiotic relationship, for “There is no parasite without a host. The host and the somewhat sinister or subversive parasite are fellow guests beside the food, sharing it” (Miller 1979: 220). Parasitism for Serres is the central fact of existence. Without the interruption of the parasite, a system would be entirely closed from the outside. Without the parasite there is no relation (Brown 2013: 96). This is the symbiotic relationship this article explores in “The Cariboo Café”.

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II. “The Cariboo Café”: National Hostility, Commercial Hospitality

Fluctuation, disorder, opacity, and noise are not and are no longer affronts to the rational; we no longer speak of this rational, we no longer divvy things up in isms, simple and stiff puzzles, strategic plans for the final conflict. Thus a system has interesting relations according to what it deemed to be its faults or depreciations. What then about its noises and parasites. Can we rewrite a system [...] not in the key of preestablished harmony but in what be [Leibniz] called seventh cords?

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

Although the United States uses the model of hospitality to portray the country's relationship with its immigrants, Ali Behdad, following Mireille Rosello in *Postcolonial Hospitality*, explains that this model obscures the economics of immigration and also the disciplining of its aliens by the state apparatus (Behdad 2005: 14, 9). Hostility, rather than hospitality, has structured the United States' dealings with its migrants.³ The hostility of the host country is evident from the opening of "The Cariboo Café": the family arrived "in the secrecy of night" as befits displaced people. There is only a temporary and conditional occupation in the host country: they stayed for a week, a month, eventually for a lifetime. The idea was to create a home, a finer future "where the toilet was one's own" (Viramontes 1995: 65), and the children did not need to be frightened. As in other renditions such as Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984), this version of the American Dream proves hard to achieve, and in the meantime, the family has to be content with occupying a different spatiality, a geography of invisibility and disposability. Thus the children had to play "in the back alleys, among the broken glass" (Viramontes 1995: 65). Significantly, these are the spaces of hospitality in the story, a set of spatial coordinates more accurately defined as pertaining to hostility. Hostility permeates the rules the parents inculcate in the children. There is no contact with the outside world, and only the key to the apartment can protect the children from looming chaos and deportation. "The poli" are the visible face of hostility, and, as defined by the children's father, they are "men in black who get kids and send them to Tijuana" (67). They are, indeed, an impersonation of the boogey man. The children are admonished to run if they see them, for the poli hates them (67). Once the key is lost, however, there is no longer an inside/outside, and the threat of the outside becomes real. Sonya and Mackey become two homeless children exiled from the conditional hospitality of the home. Significantly, there is no home in the story as defined by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard claims that "the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (1994: 6). There are just temporary occupations of non-homes where the children and the nameless woman from Central America will seek refuge, namely the Cariboo Café and a hotel. Both qualify as non-places according to Marc Augé's categorization. If a place "can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Augé 1995: 77-78). Only Miss Ávila, who regularly takes care of the children while the parents are at work, could offer them a safe sanctuary if the children could only retrace their steps back to her. Between the family apartment and Miss Avila's home, however, an inhospitable stretch of streets unfolds. "Things never looked the same when backwards", Sonya finds out as she searched for familiar scenes" that were no

longer there (Viramontes 1995: 66). The nocturnal landscape, “a maze of alleys and dead ends, the long, abandoned warehouses shadowing any light” (67), confirms the new hostile urban layout. Only the Cariboo Café, described as “a beacon of light at the end of a dark sea” (68) appears as the place of possible hospitality.

In the absence of hospitality at the national level, the story only offers commercial hospitality, as section II illustrates. Narrated from the point of view of the café owner, the section offers his confession or deposition. He appears as the manager of a closed and orderly system: his café is clean; he is “honest”, and he offers the best prices on “double-burger deluxes” (Viramontes 1995: 68). The word “deluxe”, however, seems to be out of place in this particular setting, and he hastens to clarify that the meat is not pure beef but he tells his clients up front. From the beginning of his narrative it seems clear that the owner is intent on creating a system, a micro nation-state that is apparently open to all. However, and even if a “system is often described as harmony”, as Serres comments “we know of no system that functions perfectly, that is to say, without losses, flights, wear and tear, errors, accidents, opacity —a system whose return is one for one, where the yield is maximal, and so forth” (2007: 12-13). There are, as we find in the story, losses, flights, errors, opacity and accidents that tear this fabric of perfection and leave blood stains on the scrubbed floor. Wendy Swyt argues that the eruption of the grotesque “disrupts the symbolic regulation of the social body” (1998: 197). For Serres there is an equivalency between work and police, between regulating, creating order, checking permits and acting as a customs officer (2007: 91). The reason is that in creating order any particular system has to chase out disorder.

Seemingly aware of this tension between order and chaos, admission and rejection, the café owner claims he will never put up stupid signs restricting entry to his café/system, such as “We reserve the right of refuse service to anyone”, or, “No shirt, no shoes, no service” (Viramontes 1995: 68), thus depicting the café as a welcoming space. As the story unfolds, however, the reader is aware of a counter narrative of hostility that is manifest in the owner’s perception of potential customers as “scum” that has to eat. To his own credit he adds that he even received “that crazy lady and the two kids that started all the trouble” (69). Derrida explains that “hospitality is owed to the other as stranger: But if one determines the other as stranger, one is already introducing the circles of conditionality that are family, nation, state, and citizenship” (2000a: 8). By qualifying customers as “scum” or crazy he is creating his own circles of conditionality and border-patrolling his business against the Other. The owner reveals himself as the rationalist that believes that order is under siege by the Other, by disorder and noise (cf. Serres 2007: 14). He is not only talking about street people like whores or out-of-luckers, but also drug addicts such as Paulie. Paulie

opens the series of three that introduces the presence of the undesired, the abject, the disturber of the peace. As a drug addict, he is the first manifestation of the guest-parasite, substance abuser, and hospitality abuser. The café is also the ephemeral sanctuary for three illegal workers from the illegal factory during a police raid.⁴ In the owner's characterization, they seem to be "roaches when the lightswitch goes on" (Viramontes 1995: 71). To this constellation of undesirables Viramontes adds a new arrival: the unnamed woman that has found the lost children. Together they come into the café, the non-place turned into temporary sanctuary. Their presence is a reminder of the return of the excluded, the repressed, the alleged parasites that keep returning to the feast (cf. Serres 2007: 97).

Hostility marks the encounter between the café owner/host and the woman/guest from the start: "Already I know that she's bad news because she looks street to me. Round face, burnt-toast color, black hair that hangs like straight ropes. Weirdo" (Viramontes 1995: 69), he comments. The woman is automatically transformed into the racialized Other, a displaced street person, a weirdo ready to introduce chaos in the fragile system of the café. Her mere presence beckons an exhortation, a free meal he is not ready to provide, as he comments: "Shit if I have to dish out a free meal" (69). From the beginning of the encounter with the woman, the reluctant host perceives her as a parasite ready to sponge off his good will. It is possible to escalate this fear of the uninvited and abusive guest onto the national sphere. Migrants, from this perspective, can be depicted as guests uninvited into the nation state, ready to sponge off resources of regular working class people, as the racialized nativist discourse propounds. To this act of automatic essentialization, the café owner adds a narrative of neglect. The dried snot all over Macky's face suggests the mother cannot take care of herself, let alone of her children. It is, indeed, another feature of the parasite, for they can never nourish their own children (Serres 2007: 131).

Initially there is no sound attached to the interaction between host and guest. When sound comes in, and the owner hears the lady saying something in Spanish, he immediately conceptualizes the woman as illegal, as belonging south of the border: "Right off I know she's illegal, which explains why she looks like a weirdo" (Viramontes 1995: 70). Illegality is associated with the way a language sounds and with specific physical traits, as if creating a particular isomorphism of language and ethnicity. The host stands as the commanding figure, representing power and the source of the emission of sound. As the cook/host waits on the woman there unfolds a parallel process where the dominant language assumes the mastery over the language of the Other, which is transformed into a precarious guest/parasite language. A guest and a guest language share similar limitations and are subjected to different forms of mastery.⁵ Spanish as a guest/parasite language appears to be

a street language automatically associated with what the cook sees as a disposable and parasitical social group. Spanish becomes an unwanted guest or parasite when compared to English, the host language. Like the master/host, a host language derives its power from the place where it is spoken, from being *chez soi*, as well as from a community of peers that defines it as the majority language. Whatever does not sound organically native and pertaining to the land is deemed illegal, marginal or backward. The cook voices the well-known isomorphism of a country that views itself as white, English-speaking and preferably Anglo-Saxon. Different languages and skin colors fall into the category of the parasitical Other. For the cook, Spanish is just noise, a “parasitic dissonance”, in Serres’ words (2007: 127), another disturber of the peace and order.

The parasite eats but also speaks, and his or her presence is tantamount to a burst of static, to a break in a message (Serres 2007: 8). For the philosopher, “The introduction of a parasite in a system is equivalent to the introduction of a noise” (2007: 184). In *Hermès I: La Communication*, Serres describes noise as “set of interference phenomena that become obstacles to communication” (1968: 49). Noise, in Serres depiction, is the parasitic element impossible to do without, for it is present in every aspect of order making: “The chaos of the zero state, before the first day, endures throughout the week and even enters paradise” (2007: 87). Not in vain, the critic claims, “In the beginning was the noise” (2007: 13). Noise is inextricably related to difference, disorder and the irrational. It is the always already there that is inherent to the production of order. As a complex of obstacles to communication, noise, in fact, is the background for all forms of communication, “a sort of Ur-noise” comparable to formless matter (Assad 1999: 19). For every attempt at creating a neat, orderly and rational system there will always be a parallel process of noise making, as Serres remarks: “The very production of order, secretion, the organism itself undertaking production, are all struggling to exit, struggling against a never-ending noise, against being dragged down toward the mortal fate of mixtures” (2007: 87).

Serres’ exploration of noise as inextricable from order making can illuminate the host’s reaction to the unnamed woman and her speech. His reaction to Spanish as an illegal language, and as noise is problematic, for, even if characterized as the language of the parasite, Spanish brings echoes of the tone of voice his exwife, Nell, used with him in a moment of tenderness, when he would put his head on her lap. Spanish, it is possible to claim, may be the unwanted guest/parasite in his café but also in his life. Moreover, Spanish peppers his own discourse, as the sentence “you comprende, buddy?” (Viramontes 1995: 69) illustrates. This act of code-switching implies a disturbance of the linguistic system. Revealingly, the cook is already browning his own discourse, significantly borrowing Spanish words to

convey his message. The cook, in some way, is participating in noise-making. He is imperceptibly secreting his own noise, and being dragged, in the process, down to the "the mortal fate of mixtures" (Serres 2007: 87). The path of mixtures is not only linguistic, for the image of parasite immigrants and parasite languages is further compromised when to the cook's surprise the woman pays with a fever. She may be a guest in the country, but she is a "paying" guest. The paying part seems to invalidate the alleged parasitical relationship with the United States. The question, then, is who is the host and who is the parasite, or who is more of a parasite than the other.

III. Quiet Invitations

Today immigrants appear as threatening outsiders, knocking at the gates, or crashing the gates, or sneaking through the gates into societies richer than those from which the immigrants came. The immigration-receiving countries behave as though they were not parties to the process of immigration. But in fact they are partners. International migrations stand at the intersection of a number of economic and geopolitical processes that link the countries involved; they are not simply the outcome of individuals in search of better opportunities. Part of the problem of understanding immigration is recognizing how, why, and when governments, economic actors, media, and populations at large in highly developed countries participate in the immigration process.

Saskia Sassen, *Guests and Aliens*

Saskia Sassen's words establish the symbiotic relation between guests and hosts, between receiving and sending countries. It is a partnership that inextricably links both sets of players. There are no hosts without guests, just as there are no hosts without parasites and vice versa. Yet this "participation" is never part of the discourse of immigration, especially at a time when hospitality is no longer a mark of civilization. Significantly there are few laws mandating the welcoming of the Other,⁶ but there are plenty of laws and regulations restricting or outlawing the giving of shelter to a migrant.⁷ For Tahar Ben Jelloun the partnership between hosts and guests is embedded in the roots and routes of migration. For the writer the migrant does not turn up out of the blue, but is "set by History on the path that leads to my house (my country), to a place where he will be received as a guest" (Jelloun 1999: 6). History can place a particular country on the path to migration for many reasons such as colonialism, invasion or political interference: "The whole significance of immigration lies in the fact that the immigrant is expected. The Other is on his way. Maybe he wasn't formally asked to come, but somehow or other the invitation was issued" (1999: 6). The invitation may not have been voiced, but it is frequently based on the host country's dealings with

other countries. As the well-known saying goes, the immigrant is *here* because the host country illegally crossed its own borders and was *there* (Cf. Carbonell 1999: 59; Franco 2002: 127).

Section III in “The Cariboo Café” explores the nature of this quiet “invitation” to the United States. Narrated from the point of view of the unnamed woman, it traces the regime of terror imposed in an unspecified Central American country during the 80’s, when the United States aided the Contras in their armed conflict against the Sandinista Government of Nicaragua. Viramontes, however, does not provide details of the war or of the conflicting countries. Instead, the writer foregrounds the suffering of a mother who tries in vain to find her missing son, Geraldo. As happened to Sonya and Macky at the opening of the story, there will be no home for this unnamed woman and her son. The section opens with a place that is its polar opposite, a location called “the detainers”, where children are forced to work for their food sorting out body parts. The unnamed woman thinks her son is living (or dying) there. Her motherly worries as to whether or not he has lice and is cold seem totally out of place in the face of the most inhospitable non-place of the story. Face to face with an official only a few years older than her son, she learns that Geraldo falls into the category of the enemy spy, his age (five) notwithstanding. “Anyone who so willfully supports the Contras in any form must be arrested and punished without delay” (Viramontes 1995: 73), is his own explanation. When she claims that her son is just a baby, the bureaucrat retorts that Contras are tricksters who know how to exploit people’s ignorance. She is dismissed as a foolish woman while he assures her they will try to locate her son, whom he mistakenly calls “Pedro”. The names of “Contras” are easily interchangeable for this boy turned into bureaucrat. Fittingly, the woman joins the ranks of women who have lost their sons and becomes another impersonation of La Llorona. Shunned by her community, she feels that her home is no longer her home: “Weeds have replaced all good crops. The irrigation ditches are clouded with bodies. [...] We try to live as best we can under the rule of men who rape women then rip their fetuses from their bellies” (1995: 75). The mutation of the home into the non-home, it is possible to claim, sets the woman, just as it set many Central Americans (if we follow Jelloun’s argument) on her way to the United States. Immigrants are therefore expected. There might have been no formal invitation, but somehow or other the invitation was issued. The arrival of the immigrant reawakens the conversation about limits and national sovereignty. The United States may or may not open its borders to paying guests while Central American countries saw their borders violated through different phases of American intervention⁸ during the 1980s. Even if there was no open invitation for the unnamed woman, the invitation was issued, indirectly, through the political upheaval of Central America. The money she saved for Geraldo’s schooling is

enough for a bus to Juarez. Her nephew, Tavo, who already lives in the United States, meets her there and welcomes her into a crowded home. In the United States the woman is still a washerwoman: she cleans toilets, dumps trash cans. She can hardly be characterized as a parasite.

IV. The Logic of Fuzzy: Hosts, Parasites and Never Ending Noise

The Devil or the Good Lord? Exclusion, inclusion? Thesis or antithesis? The answer is a spectrum, a band, a continuum. We will no longer answer with a simple yes or no to such questions of sides. Inside or outside? Between yes and no, between zero and one, an infinite number of values appear, and thus an infinite number of answers. Mathematicians call this new rigor 'fuzzy': fuzzy subsets, fuzzy topology.

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

One might even state that objects, like properties and relations, are by and large beset by vagueness.

Jean-Louis Hippolyte, *Fuzzy Fiction*

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The unnamed woman's nocturnal wanderings and the children's attempt at retracing their steps back to Miss Avila cross paths at the end of section III. In her derangement, she thinks she has finally found Geraldo in Macky. Her own doubts when seeing the boy and Macky's bewilderment are put aside and she grabs the boy as her own child. It is, as she comments, like giving birth to Geraldo/Macky once again. A hot meal is in order to celebrate this reunion, and the trio enters the Cariboo Café. There is no home for this reconstituted family, and they will only see the faces of commercial hospitality, first the café and later a hotel. The woman, the omniscient narrative voice reveals, will make arrangements to return home the following day. For the first time in years, the narrative voice adds, the woman's mind is "quiet of all noise and she has the desire to sleep" (Viramontes 1995: 77). In the morning they return to the non-place of the Cariboo Café. The omniscient narrative voice moves to the café owner, who is shocked to see her transformation: "Her hair is combed slick back into one thick braid and her earrings hang like baskets of golden pears on her finely sculpted ears" (77). Looking different and young, the voice concludes, she is "almost beautiful" (77). The initial burnt-toast color subsides in this new vision of an attractive woman. His gatekeeping activities, both linguistic and ideological, seem suspended. The system of rejection of the Other, the presumed parasite halts and opens to the principle of fuzziness, understood as vagueness. The opposition between host/guest-parasite, legal/illegal, inside/outside opens out to the infinite range of possibilities between

alleged polar opposites, between “yes and no, between zero and one, an infinite number of values appear”, Serres argues (2007: 58).

This opening up of an apparent closed system is consistent with the ‘theory of fuzzy’, a paradigm that harks back to the prevalence of uncertainty, ambiguity and vagueness in postmodern literature. Fuzziness is a vagueness “that appears both salient and pervasive, affecting objects as well as concepts, the observer and the observed, and finally offering a paradoxical coincidence of presence and absence, a ubiquity of being and not-being” (Hippolyte 2006: 11). It is also a coexistence of the alleged antithetical roles of host and guest/parasite. The study of fuzziness goes back to Bertrand Russell, who, in his attempt to reduce “all of mathematics to logic symbols”, found that math symbols did not match the concepts of the physical world. This asymmetry is commonly known as the “mismatch problem” and can be traced back to Descartes (Hippolyte 2006: 12). Following upon Russell, Lofti Zadeth coined the term *fuzzy* to address this lack of correspondence. Fuzziness addresses both quantity and quality. Just as there are different degrees within properties, there is permeability between apparently discreet entities, for “boundaries are objectively fuzzy” (Tye in Hippolyte 2006: 13). It is possible to state, according to Hippolyte, that “objects, like properties and relations, are by and large beset by vagueness” (2006: 13). Vagueness creates new intersections in the café. Just as the unnamed woman had seen her son Geraldo in Macky, so the café owner sees his own son, Jojo, in the child. Significantly, both Geraldo and Jojo are indirect or direct victims of US imperialism, whether in Central America or in Vietnam.⁹ Just as the unnamed woman is a representation of La Llorona, so the café owner can qualify to be El Llorón, the symmetrical father figure that has lost his son. Thus the initial boundaries between café owner and unnamed woman reveal themselves as inherently permeable and blurry. But the appearance of the woman yields other possible continuity between host and guest/parasite. She is literally a parasite in the etymological sense of the word (*para*, beside; *sitos*, food), eating next to the cook, but she pays for the food like any other customer, to the cook’s surprise. Furthermore, it is possible to say, as Derrida claimed, that the cook, as the owner of the place, is “in truth a *hôte* received in his own home”. If Derrida claimed that the *hôte* as host is a guest (Derrida 1999: 41), it seems possible to add that the *hôte* as host is a parasite. His parasitical practices have to do with the food he offers, advertised as “the best prices on double-burger deluxes this side of Main Street”, but revealed as not pure beef. The owner as host is parasitizing his guests. This revelation at the micro level is consistent with the notion of the parasitical nation and the immigrant host. This is Inda’s conclusion when he claims that the nation-state is like a parasite that is dependent on migrants for its own prosperity (2000: 52). This doubling is reinforced by the fact that “host” is a divided term that contains the antithetical relation of host and guest (Miller 1979: 55).

In contrast to the drawing of clear-cut distinctions and antinomies, between the chaser and the chased, hosts and guests/parasites, order and disorder, the story takes the reader to the realm of fuzziness, noise, and what Serres calls “the mortal face of mixtures” (2007: 87). The unnamed woman, as the uninvited guest, creates a new complexity that problematizes the relationship between a country and its immigrants/parasites. The story seems to claim that interdependence between a country and its guests/parasites is far more complex than is frequently acknowledged and represented. Maybe the nation-state and its immigrants are at once host and parasite to each other (Inda 2000: 58); maybe the immigrant/parasite inhabits the host nation and the parasitic nation inhabits the host immigrant (2000: 58); maybe the parasitical nation invaded the parasitic immigrant’s country through political or armed intervention, and set migrants on their way to the United States, as Jelloun suggests. What seems clear is that chaos and noise permeate any attempt at order-making in the story. Viramontes seems to drag characters and readers into the fuzziness of her writing. Just as there are no stable categories in the story, so the division into sections seems impossible to maintain. Like the characters themselves, readers are dragged into the realm of fuzzy and thence into the mortal fate of mixtures.

Notes

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2. See Trump’s statements on immigration during the 2016 Presidential campaign: <http://www.ontheissues.org/2016/Donald_Trump_Immigration.htm>.

3. See, for example, Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), Karen T. Yamashita’s *I Hotel* (2010), Miné Okubo’s

Citizen 13660 (1946), Quiñonez’s *Chango’s Fire* (2004), to name only a few.

4. However, the owner of the café is almost as much of a victim as are the undocumented workers he calls “scum” (Saldívar-Hull 1991: 218).

5. See Ana María Manzanás and Jesús Benito (2017: 138).

6. The European Commission states that “Asylum is granted to people fleeing persecution or serious harm in their own country and therefore in need of international protection. Asylum is a fundamental right; granting it is an international obligation, first recognised in the 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees” (<http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/index_en.htm>). Although the European Commission talks about the moral

imperative to welcome refugees, it continues to “build up a security apparatus that will provide oversight and total control over population influxes towards and from the external borders of the union” (Fotiadis 2015). What may seem as a failure, however, is just a policy consistent with the commission’s strategic priorities on immigration and border control policies (Fotiadis 2015).

⁷ In France on February 4th, 1997, Jacqueline Deltombe was found guilty of harboring a friend and her “undocumented” partner from Zaire. Acts of unofficial welcomes increased after Sangatte was closed and the migrants roamed around Calais. There were two more arrests in August 2005 when two teachers were accused of aiding an undocumented foreigner to stay in France, thus violating a clause in a law dating from 1945, and were prosecuted as if they were human traffickers. Similarly, two volunteers were accused of distributing food

to 29 illegals (*clandestins*) in a squat near Dunkerque. Aiding these *clandestins* is a crime according to article 21 of the ordinance of November 2nd, 1945. The sentences were increased by the Sarkozy law of 2003. What in 1945 was a criminal act is now in danger of becoming an act of terrorism (Derrida 2001: 16).

⁸ The Iran-Contra affair was a covert foreign operation concerning two apparently unrelated countries, Nicaragua and Iran. The United States militarily supported the Contras against the Sandinistas at a time when Congress had cut off funds to the Contras. The money came from the selling of arms to Iran in Exchange for the release of American hostages in Lebanon. The profits from the arms sales were used to support the Nicaraguan Contras.

⁹ See Manzanas and Benito’s *Cities, Borders and Spaces* (2011: 47).

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