

**THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF HOSPITALITY IN U.S.
LITERATURE AND CULTURE**

Amanda Ellen Gerke, Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan
and Patricia San José Rico, eds.
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CARLA ABELLA RODRÍGUEZ

Universidad de Salamanca
carla.abella.rodriguez@usal.es
<<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2511-5977>>

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The ongoing flow of refugees, the outbreaks of wars and the continuous mobilisation of people under the threat of ecological crises do not cease to challenge our international, national and personal limits to the reception of the Other, the stranger. Infamous inhospitable practices, such as the British policy to send asylum-seekers to Rwanda, beg the following question: Is it even possible to talk about hospitality in our contemporary world? Jacques Derrida recognised that “[w]e do not know what hospitality is. Not yet. Not yet, but will we ever know?” (2000: 6). The authors of the essays in *The Poetics and Politics of Hospitality in US Literature and Culture* (2020), edited by Amanda Ellen Gerke, Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan and Patricia San José Rico, try to give a timely answer to these conundrums by studying literary and visual texts that address different acts of (in)hospitality in past and contemporary America. This work contributes to the growing field of hospitality studies that critically approach literature and culture, which includes the volumes *Cine y Hospitalidad: Narrativas Visuales del Otro* (2021), edited by Ana M. Manzanas and Domingo Hernández, and Ana M. Manzanas and Jesús Benito’s *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture: Spaces, Bodies, Borders* (2017). Indeed, the present volume takes the latter as a point of reference and further delves into hospitality strands within a wide scope of literary traditions. The collection is part of the series “Critical Approaches to Ethnic American Literature”, edited by Jesús Benito and Ana M. Manzanas, and is organised in twelve

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chapters covering miscellaneous authors and texts, except for the first introductory chapter.

The first chapter lays out the theoretical framework, which is based on philosophical theories of hospitality, the backbone of the individual essays. More precisely, the volume relies on Emmanuel Levinas's ethical approach that demands responsibility from the self towards the Other, and Jacques Derrida's attention to the political and the ethical to address the contemporary challenges brought about by immigration and great flows of people, unveiling hospitality as inseparable from hostile processes both for guests and hosts (2020: 5-7). A subsection on early American literature gives some useful historical and literary context, although it could have been developed further to give an overviewing timeline of the socio-political attitudes reflected in all the literary periods of the texts to be studied later. In the second chapter Puspa Damai questions Gayatri Spivak's concept of "hospitality from below", where those who colonize are guests of the colonized host (Spivak 2002: 54; 2020: 24), and reads it against the experience of Native Americans through the analysis of three novels: Yellow Bird's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* (1854), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Sherman Alexie's *Flight* (2007). Examining the three novels together, Damai reaches the conclusion that hospitality in a postcolonial context entails violence to revert the process of colonisation (2020: 28), and stresses that an unconditional hospitality which includes all peoples, the environment and nonhuman entities (2020: 30-33) is the actual path to attaining a form of hospitality from below, where the colonized guests reverse their roles and occupy their initial role as hosts. In Chapter 3, Amanda Ellen Gerke skilfully brings to the fore language as a source of power that governs hospitality acts in Latino communities. In her analysis of Junot Díaz's "Invierno", from *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012), and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Gerke puts forward the figure of the hosted guest. In the stories this translates into a male migrant who gatekeeps other migrant women and children's access to spaces (2020: 39), as women remain hostages to imprisoning domestic spatialities. The imposition of protocols of linguistic control on female characters also prevents access to knowledge of the nation-state. This idea appears, for instance, in the male gatekeeper forbidding the matriarchal figure to learn English, the primary language of the country, which would give her agency and free access to the social spaces of the host-nation. However, Gerke suggests language is a double-edged sword when she argues agentive speech acts also allow women to challenge the host's patriarchal rule.

Chapter 4 continues the thought-provoking exploration of linguistic hospitality in barriocentric novels, scrutinising the previously discussed *The House on Mango Street* and Piri Thomas's *Down these Mean Streets* (1967). Luisa María González

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Rodríguez brings together these texts to examine the concept of language divergence as a “symbolic strategy for maintaining spatial, social, and ethnic hierarchies” (2020: 59). She observes that for Latino migrants in America the English language works as a prestige language that facilitates their inclusion in the host country (2020: 61-64). Yet English imposes an inhospitable “alienation and estrangement” on those clinging to Spanish as a heritage language that links them to their home culture and identity (2020: 63). Also tapping into the hostility of language, José R. Ibáñez discusses the very habitability of language. Ibáñez dissects exile writer Ha Jin’s much criticised choice of writing in English rather than in his native tongue, Chinese. Departing from the idea that language can be a place of residence (2020: 82; Derrida 1998: 1), Ibáñez questions the notion of the host’s ownership of language. Ibáñez convincingly argues that Ha Jin develops his own hybrid style which incorporates, for example, the nativisation of Chinese expressions, to challenge “monolingual views of language while, at the same time, calling into question the rules that the host imposes on the guest” (2020: 89-90). Chapter 6 shifts the attention to instances of (in)hospitality in earlier American fiction through Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan’s study of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s historical short fiction. Guerrero-Strachan insists that Hawthorne uncovers contemporary anxieties over national identity and the fear of the Other by drawing from the provincial *locus*. For Guerrero-Strachan, “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” (1836) allows the author to criticise how colonisation imposes a societal state of inherent inhospitality, and “Endicott and the Red Cross” (1838) foregrounds Puritan intolerance toward groups professing other religions, which challenges Derrida’s unconditional hospitality and reveals the Puritans as guests who become displaced hosts imposing their rule (2020: 105-106). Meanwhile, “The Gentle Boy” (1833) shows the necessity of hospitality if a societal order is to sustain religious tolerance.

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In Chapter 7, Laura López Peña insists that openness towards alterity is key to hospitable acts in Herman Melville’s work. Through a characterological analysis of *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876), López Peña demonstrates that openness towards the Other allows for a more true and unconditional hospitality (2020: 115-116). López Peña points to the ethical link between the self and the Other referencing Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas and Judith Butler, among others, and how “vulnerability [...] make[s] us more hospitable or receptive to the suffering of others” (2020: 117). The failure of interpersonal connections results in unreciprocated hospitality, which negatively impacts the lives of the characters and further reinforces political and religious divisions. In the next chapter, Cristina Garrigós exquisitely surveys the multiple sides to food and eating as practices and metaphors of hospitality. She does so scrutinising three of Ruth Ozeki’s novels. In her analysis of *My Years of Meats* (1998), Garrigós argues that, through the making

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of a food programme, hospitality appears as an unauthentic spectacle. The portrayal of an authentic and hospitable America is challenged: Garrigós reveals the sanitisation of inhospitality towards ethnic minorities by showing, for instance, how hostility lies behind the choice to film a white middle class family for the programme instead of a poorer African American family. In her discussion of *All Over Creation* (2003), Garrigós explores the mutability of the guest and host categories in a farming community as well as the notion of parasitism. In her remarks on *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), Garrigós studies the cannibalism of the Other and dissects the notion of hospitality, which had not received critical interest in previous studies of this novel. She proceeds to analyse how hospitality is informed by Ozeki's Zen Buddhist perspective, which dissolves the self and the Other as differentiated entities (2020: 148), to make the point that hospitality entails interconnectedness with all beings. In Chapter 9, Patricia San José Rico traces how Irish migrants went from being considered unwelcome parasitic guests to becoming hosts in the American nation-state. Using a Levinasian and Derridean framework, San José Rico examines the social construction of race and the racialisation of the Irish as an Other in novels documenting the Irish-American experience, such as Frank McCourt's *Tis* (1999), Mary Gordon's *The Other Side* (1989) and Taylor Caldwell's *Captains and the Kings* (1972). She also discusses how the Irish themselves erased certain identity features to pass and ultimately assimilate as white. The Irish thus became hosts in the country by differentiating themselves from other ethnic minorities at the expense of reinforcing the hostility towards the latter.

In the following chapter, Ana María Manzanás Calvo builds on the discussion of the mutable identities of guest and host in Tom Wolfe's *Back to Blood* (2012), Ana Lydia Vega's "Encancaranublado" (1992) and Francisco Goldman's *The Ordinary Seaman* (1997). She zones in on the sea and its colonial past as an analytical tool to examine the liquid line separating the host and guest, hospitality and hostility, mobility and stasis in the (in)hospitable acts governing the arrival of Caribbean migrants in the US. She proposes that the hostility towards Caribbean migrants reflected in these texts harks back to the past and slavery, especially through the recurring space of the ship, reinscribing these migrant Others as "neo-slaves" (2020: 190), disposable entities under the nation's conditional law. In Chapter 11, Maria Antònia Oliver-Rotger dissects hospitality in Tim Z. Hernandez's *Mañana Means Heaven* (2013) through a comparative analysis with the novel it reinscribes, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). Oliver-Rotger takes as a point of departure the road, a liminal site that prompts hospitable encounters and the dissolution of differences between the self and the Other (2020: 197; Manzanás and Benito 2017: 9). Against the fetishisation of ethnicity and the limitations of hospitality towards the guest found in Jack Kerouac's novel, Oliver-Rotger contends *Mañana Means Heaven* highlights the gender and racial differences of the guest, the main

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female character (2020: 202-205). Oliver-Rotger proposes that this novel is a *Bildungsroman* where the female protagonist does not attain the mobility the road promised but, rather, becomes reconciled with her position as a migrant Mexican worker (2020: 208). Ángel Mateos-Aparicio and Jesús Benito Sánchez close the collection of essays with their study on zombies in the TV show *The Walking Dead* (2008-) from a Derridean lens. Following a thorough analysis of this figure, the authors argue that zombies represent the threat of immigrants in America, this is, parasites that erase the difference between the dead and the living, the host and guest, from within the host-nation (2020: 218-219). The negotiation of (in) hospitality for survival reveals the complexity of hospitality as a continuum between unconditional and conditional encounters. For instance, the protagonists' parasitic appropriation of welcoming communities shows the corruption of infinite hospitality (2020: 226). Meanwhile, a cannibalistic community of survivors blurs the distinction between the undead and the living in an illustration of the perversion of hospitality (2020: 226-227).

All in all, this volume is a compelling addition to the field of hospitality studies and a valuable resource for critical approaches to Otherness. The strongest point of this book is the wide range and scope of hospitality encounters it presents, from the role of food in hospitality gestures to the hostility of language. This reflects that hospitality is not a stable notion, but rather mutable and aporetic, a point made in all the essays, leading to the impossibility of a clear definition of hospitality, as Derrida signalled. The analysed texts range from American Renaissance works to contemporary ones and include a variety of groups that become guests and hosts of (un)welcoming acts of reception. Despite the diversity of thematic chapters, these remain quite isolated since the cross-references between them are not addressed within the chapters. The volume could have included a conclusion to put the multiple lines of research in conversation. The collection could also have benefited from a thematic arrangement to organise chapters that share clear linkages through the periods, works and approaches they discuss, with a view to highlighting these promising areas of research. With the exception of the last chapter, all the essays focus on literary works. In future volumes on hospitality the editors may consider expanding the types of texts to include more audio-visual texts, popular culture or new media, and in this way address newer horizons opened up by the subject of hospitality.

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