Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

18 | 2019

Guerre en poésie, poésie en guerre

Ana M^a Manzananas Calvo, Jesús Benito Sánchez, *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture. Spaces, Bodies, Borders*

Isabelle Keller-Privat

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/17730>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.17730

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Isabelle Keller-Privat, "Ana M^a Manzananas Calvo, Jesús Benito Sánchez, *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture. Spaces, Bodies, Borders*", *Miranda* [Online], 18 | 2019, Online since 16 April 2019, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/17730> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.17730>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.

Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Ana M^a Manzananas Calvo, Jesús Benito Sánchez, *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture. Spaces, Bodies, Borders*

Isabelle Keller-Privat

REFERENCES

Ana M^a Manzananas Calvo, Jesús Benito Sánchez, *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture. Spaces, Bodies, Borders* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 201 p., ISBN: 978-1-138-64768-8

- 1 Ana Mª Manzanás Calvo and Jesús Benito Sánchez's analysis of hospitality in American literature and culture is a seminal study. It does not only offer a rejuvenated and intensely stimulating perspective on American immigrant literature and visual arts in a beautifully written and consistent essay, but it also explores the ethics and praxis of hospitality through a simultaneously comprehensive and analytical approach that foregrounds paramount issues in modern day Humanities.
- 2 The volume first investigates what the authors have called "a genealogy of hospitality" (n.p.) and delves into the ambivalent etymology that confronts hospitality and hostility, the guest and the ghost, hospitality and hostipitalizing. Relying on Derrida and Schérer's work, this philological approach artfully blends in with the examination of ancient and biblical practices of hospitality that are powerfully pitted against the cruel inhospitality of our contemporary history. Hospitality is thus reappraised in the introduction as "a critical lens", a "paradigm" (7) that enables the authors to reread American culture. Progressively, we are shown how hospitality functions as a trope that reconfigures our relation to space and borders, the self and the other, as well as our perception of time. Indeed, hospitality alters established geographical and intellectual borders and opens up new forms of exchange through which the identity of the Self is constantly questioned.
- 3 The first chapter of the book, "Re-Placing Hospitality: (In)hospitable Sites in American Literature" examines the historical loci of hospitality, from the Hebrew Bible to classic American literature: Thoreau's *Walden*, Melville's "Bartelby, the Scrivener," or Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself". Questioning the way Western narratives of hospitality have "turned from a discourse of generosity into a discourse of spatiality and (dis)placement" (19) the authors explore the dichotomy between centrality and alterity, and remind the reader that hospitality initially occurred in the desert, a place of deterritorialization, as Deleuze argues, and not in the striated, territorialized space

of the polis. Therefore, the Self originally encounters the Other in a place where none of them is at-home, through a gesture that is according to Derrida “the deconstruction of the at-home” (*Acts of Religion*, 364; qtd 23). This principle of indetermination highlights the moving, unstable essence of hospitality that appears therefore not merely as a given individual or social fact, but as a process through which the Self welcomes vulnerability. The superb analysis of Genesis (24), leads the authors to posit hospitality as an ethics of impermanence and dispossession, a momentum of self-abnegation that is both placed and out-of-place, and displaces the dweller on the threshold. Asserting that “place gives way to responsibility” (30), the authors examine issues of power and control that come into play in the politics of hospitality and offer an insightful analysis of Emerson and Melville, finally stating that “it is in Bartleby’s death that the lawyer elicits his final response and assumes ethical responsibility for the Other” (37). The authors go on to explore the articulation between ethical and political hospitality and focus on “Colonial hospitality and the usurpation of lands” that lead them to reframe Kant’s thesis towards “Perpetual Peace”. Legalized hospitality is thus brought into sharp contrast with Emerson’s “full rencontre front to front with his fellow” (*Essays and Lectures* 521; qtd 35) since it reduces the other to a bodily presence offered a temporary sheltered abode that confines him/her. The narrow, juridical enforcement of the laws of hospitality as defined by Kant is at work, the authors argue, in the institutional inscription of hospitality in the Declaration of Independence that defines the US “as a hosting and hospitable republic” (45) which nonetheless establishes a conditional form of hospitality, reasserting the all-powerful status of the new state. The history of American hospitality, through which Old World immigrants had become the guests of indigenous peoples, before acting as hosts to future generations of migrants while denying the rights of their former hosts is recorded to highlight the complexity of the praxis of hospitality in American culture. From Caliban’s address to Prospero in *The Tempest*, to Lesley Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977), the authors delve into the spectre of inhospitality and show how the host, turned into an unwanted guest, may enact his/her own reempowerment. If the history of hospitality is inseparable from that of inhospitality, turning, as the authors contend, the Promised Land into the Land of Nod and the contemporary guest into an excluded ghost, it also fosters the dream of a communal ideal that relentlessly unsettles self-contained, hegemonic entities.

4

The second chapter, entitled “Embodying Hospitality. Biopolitics and Capitalist Flows in Steven Spielberg’s *The Terminal* and Stephen Frears’s *Dirty Pretty Things*” examines the liminal position of the undocumented migrant in a world where the smooth space of the Land of Nod has become a ruthlessly striated one, crisscrossed by fences, borders and silent, all-seeing monitoring systems. In this dystopic world questions of identity are intimately bound up with political issues of national preservation that do not necessarily entail the protection of the individual’s rights. In such a system the individual is absorbed only to be either incorporated or excluded by the body of the nation-state which the authors define as “thriv[ing] on the imposition and multiplication of borders [...] [that] work at many different levels beyond the geographical” (63) and create inner places of exclusion where the migrant is alienated spatially, legally, linguistically and symbolically in “places of inclusive exclusion” (63). And yet, these redundant bodies, the authors point out, outlining what could be called the bio-ecopolitics of hospitality, usher in a radically new economy by altering the rules of exchange and bringing in new blood to our decaying Western civilization. As

Schére remarks, “hospitality has and is an economy, in the full sense of the word, because it constantly reestablishes the production and circulation of a flux that would otherwise petrify and impoverish itself” (*Zeus hospitalier* 126). Must genuine, unconditional and free hospitality necessarily challenge the rules of the Law, as an ethical response and an individual praxis that constantly infringes upon the secular order? Such a Derridean conceptualization of hospitality would then imply a resistance to the hegemony of the state and define hospitality as the praxis of the impossible in a world of binding certainties. Such is the fate of the wandering characters in *The Terminal* and *Dirty Pretty Things* where hospitality—or rather hostipitality—mainly serves to ensure the despotic power of the host. In the latter case, the abject embodiment of such power is conveyed by the scars of the migrant organ donors who, far from being the parasites they are supposed to be, turn out to be the very blood and marrow inhospitable economic forces feed upon.

- 5 In the third chapter, entitled “Cannibalistic Hospitality. Alex Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer*,” the reader is brought to ponder the process of incorporation whereby the migrant is absorbed and transformed by the host, to the point that his Otherness is negated and destroyed. Incorporation thus conveys the inherent fear of the Other as the uncanny other and echoes the encounter between Polyphemus and Ulysses which is aptly interpreted by the authors as an instance of cannibalism that “rewrites the discourse of hospitality, for it implies the total dissolution of boundaries” (84). Naturally, such an extreme form of hospitality is resonant with our own colonial and postcolonial history. Alex Rivera’s mock documentary “Why Cybraceros?” and his movie *Sleep Dealer* shift the focus to the political nature of the individual gesture of hospitality by placing the host in a position of ownership and power and neutralizing the guest into a disposable object of capitalistic production. As individuals are turned into the dismembered bodies of an anonymous labor force, the essay shows how “the human body enters the machine power” and how “within the body the boundaries between hospitality and cannibalism become more entangled” (96-7). The discourse of sci-fi dystopia exposes the perverse nature of a form of Manifest Destiny that enforces the limitless expansion of a mechanistic world where border crossing and cultural exchanges only confine the subject further; any hope of geographical or social mobility, or of humane encounter is crushed. Such is the counter-narrative of the American Dream.
- 6 Chapter 4, “We the People of the International Hotel” and the Hotel State: Karen T. Yamashita’s *I Hotel*”, delves into unexpected places of belonging, more specifically the hotel, which despite its economic function within the tourist industry, may also be reappropriated as a displaced home. Based on a careful analysis of Karen T. Yamashita’s *I Hotel*, this chapter explores what is left of hospitality when the workforce that was initially welcomed becomes unwanted. Such a “sick hospitality” (107) that distinguishes between inclusion (always momentary, and conditional) and belonging (always atemporal, and unconditional) creates inner pockets of exclusion, in-between, grey zones where the migrant must invent new forms of belonging. Out-of-place, yet deeply rooted in a cornered space, the migrant “transforms non-belonging into the genesis for new political articulations” (109). As a result, the authors show how the hotel can operate as a reversible threshold: it is a heterotopia, an alien space transformed by the ageing, dispossessed characters, into a shelter that fosters a renewed community. From a place conceived as a means of “gatekeeping” (113) the hotel comes to provide a home away from home: it turns into an entrenched place of resistance where the characters deploy a democratic form of belonging, a political dwelling of the inhospitable. The

authors thus powerfully show how the hotel may be viewed as a paradoxical “final Desti-nation” (114), a place that articulates memory and commitment, occupation of and dissensus within the common space, and that ultimately redefines the paradigms of belonging. Yamishita’s art lies in the reterritorialization of American history and of Native American myths that confronts the reader with the endless possibilities of a new kind of commonality.

- 7 In the fifth chapter, “Between Hospitality and Hostility”. Junot Diaz’s “Invierno” invites the reader to confront a family despot, the epitome of Derrida’s *paterfamilias*, a Dominican father who transforms hospitality into hostility when welcoming his family at JFK airport only to lock them up in the apartment of a new immigrant neighborhood still under construction. While revisiting the topos of mobility, this chapter broadens the scope of the inquiry to include issues of narrative and linguistic hospitality and envisages the power relation between the dominant language of the host and the precarious, marginalized language and narrative of the guest. Confining his wife in the apartment, the father thus bars her from entering a foreign language, and creates another, embedded space of alienation, denying the relational essence of space as a “site of exchanges and coexisting trajectories” (140). Such an insightful demonstration echoes Andrew Benjamin’s hypothesis: “Being-in-common [...] marks the primordially of relationality, and thus what counts as human being needs to be incorporated within a relational ontology” (*Place, Commonality and Judgment*, 29). Simultaneously, the authors show how the social and linguistic isolation imposed by the father is mirrored and exacerbated by the spatial isolation of the entire community established in the vicinity of a landfill, “a diseased and infectious site, [...] a spatial stereotype for unwanted guests” (142).
- 8 In chapter 6, “Between Hosts and Guests. Ernesto Quiñonez’s *Chango’s Fire* and Mastery over Place”, the authors further interrogate the logics of an inhospitable urbanism that alienates migrant workers and wonder who is ever permanently at home in a big city. The novel reads as a reappraisal of the urban planning policy of Manhattan that fosters the imaginary self-enclosed spaces where the characters are made to feel the weight of social, ethnic and economic hierarchies. The Barrio, according to the authors, thus stands out as the epitome of “the dissonant, the different, the non-integrable” (155), another locus of memory and resistance, “on the border of extinction” (157). Such spaces bear the imprint of time, of destruction or mere deterioration through sheer neglect, embedded in an ongoing history of deliberate disregard. They are the unseen places of a neglected form of belonging, of a traumatic identity that Julio brings back to life in his narrative. The authors convincingly argue that “eviction and dislocation delineate the contours of the Barrio, and become part of its inner logic [...], a pattern that creates what can be called a *structural place*.” (158) The structuring power of the dismantled, traumatic space, is heightened by the polyphonic reworking of African American spirituals into Latino spirituals, creating a linguistic “architecture of hospitality” (161). Likewise the adoption of Spanglish operates as a “way of repossessing the Barrio and creating a verbal city” (162), a gesture which is strongly reminiscent of Edmond Jabès’s defence of “the hospitality of the book” that metamorphoses the broken and the discarded into something riotously alive. The authors thus convincingly show how “language becomes the place of hospitality” (163), the ideal home of the dispossessed where the Other, the particular, the dissimilar, the uncanny can be made at home. The artful conclusion of this chapter brings the reader to envisage the epistemological implications of literature and the arts that bring us to

realize that “to know always implies to know as Other, with the help of the disruptive power of the imagination” (164).

- 9 The last chapter, “Guest/Ghost Object in the Garden. George Saunders’s “The Semplica Girl Diaries””, is indubitably the climax of the entire monograph that throws the reader into a haunted and haunting world, spurring him to question the invisibility of the Other. The migrant returns as a ghostly guest through the ethereal figures of achromatic immigrant women fluttering in the wind, like the spectral daffodils decorating the gardens of blind, soulless masters. Hanging on a line, like breathing clothes, they embody the devitalized other, the modern version of Billie Holliday’s “Strange Fruit,” who have been simultaneously disempowered and disembodied and turned into signifiers of ostentatious wealth. The garden functions as an anti-Eden where the fruit of knowledge has been replaced by the fruit of consumption. The denial of the immigrant workers’ humanity also entails a devitalization of the natural space: the garden becomes a sinister stage, inhabited by hollow women—“Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion” (Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, 79). Saunders’s gardens usher in an Eliotian “hollow valley” (81) where the birthday gift converts into a deathly performance that dehumanizes the viewer in return. The spectacle is truly obscene, in all senses of the phrase: it throws into the limelight the violent reality that underlies the economic hegemony of the ruling class; as such, it is a perfect illustration of Baudrillard’s definition of the obscene as the apparition of reality: “[...] visible things do not terminate in obscurity and in silence; they vanish into what is more visible than the visible: obscenity” (*Selected Writings*, Mark Poster ed., Stanford UP 2002 188). And this obscene spectacle is also, in the etymological sense of the word, an ominous sight that will eventually destroy the family’s American Dream: the migrant girls finally run away, leaving the father up to his eyes in debt. Through their final exit, they reveal themselves as being far more than the expected powerless extras: they become the agents of an economic and social reversal that disempowers the affluent, successful family. This power reversal acts as a foil to the initial reversal of hospitality and foregrounds the precarious essence of economic success as fleeing guests and dispossessed hosts eventually come to share the same fate: “They become homeless in a new version of the Land of Nod. Those around them simply register their suffering, a pain that cannot be stopped” (183).
- 10 The ethical resonance and the metaphysical and literary significance of this essay is brought about by a superb co-writing that powerfully articulates structural, symbolic and theoretical paradigms to weld a cogent and illuminating investigation of American literature and arts. Through the lens of hospitality, Ana M^a Manzananas Calvo and Jesús Benito Sánchez do not only draw our attention to perceptive works of art and to the ethical commitment at stake: they also urge us to reread the world through the focus of arts and acknowledge the duty of attention and care for the Other that behoves artists, readers and spectators alike.

INDEX

Keywords: contemporary American literature, hospitality, hostility, spectrality, host, guest, space, nomadology, corporality, border, migration, citizenship, identity, nation-state, politics, alterity, belonging, temporality, gift, hotel, cannibalism, incorporation, labor force, globalization, deterritorialization, community, history, Law, language, urbanism, memory

Mots-clés: littérature américaine contemporaine, hospitalité, hostilité, spectralité, hôte, invité, spacialité, nomadologie, corporéité, frontières, migration, citoyenneté, identité, état-nation, politique, altérité, appartenance, temporalité, don, hôtel, cannibalisme, assimilation, main d'œuvre, globalisation, déterritorialisation, communauté, Histoire, droit, langage, urbanisme, mémoire

AUTHORS

ISABELLE KELLER-PRIVAT

Maître de conférences HDR

Université Toulouse II – Jean Jaurès

isa.kellerprivat@free.fr