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## Study Notes for Jacques Derrida's *Of Hospitality*

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Gordon Lester, *Jacques Derrida with Bear* (2003, gouache on paper).

### Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*

Jacques Derrida is widely thought to be the most important French philosopher of the latter part of the twentieth century. Arguably he is among the most significant and influential

philosophers of the modern world. He wrote over forty books on a very wide range of subjects, including:

*Plato's Pharmacy*, a meditation on several of Plato's dialogues, including a groundbreaking analysis of the last pages of the *Phaedrus*.

*Specters of Marx*, an exploration of both the problems and the possibilities of Marx's work for social and political thought today. Why, he asks, are we so inhospitable to Marx, who imagined a hospitable world? Why do we continue to express the desire to banish or exorcize the ghost or spectre of Marx, a thinker who called for us to form solidarities in the name of human flourishing? What is it about his social and political thought that prevents him from being expelled once and for all? The call for social justice that his work embodies, after all, is permanent and cannot be gainsaid. It is always with us, issued from a past that was never locatably present, never a single moment in time, and so feels like it comes from the future.

*The Animal That Therefore I Am (more to follow)*, a volume based on ten hours of lectures that Derrida gave discussing the significance of falling under "the gaze" of non-human animals (which, in French philosophy, does not mean literally feeling like animals are "looking" at you, but instead responding to their mortal vulnerability and treating them as lives worthy of life). Derrida here in effect picks up where Emmanuel Levinas leaves off, pointing out that when Levinas speaks of welcoming the other he actually means welcoming the *human* other. In Levinas, the other is in fact the other "man." What then would it mean to turn to the *face* of the non-human animal? That's the question that plagues "The Name of a Dog" and "The Paradox of Morality," two important texts by Levinas. (Levinas is a Talmudic scholar and philosopher who, after the Holocaust, made a compelling case for social and political thought to turn towards the radical singularity and mortal vulnerability of the other.)

*The Politics of Friendship*, an analysis of philosophical conceptions of friendship and fraternity going back to classical antiquity. Friendship is often considered to be of marginal interest to "serious" philosophy, but Derrida demonstrates that it in fact lies at the heart of European philosophy. –A very typical move in Derrida's work, demonstrating how that which has been deemed to be of little importance turns out to hold the key to unlocking what it most important.

Derrida is the subject of several films. He is the focus of several hundred books of analysis and criticism and thousands of essays by other thinkers, including myself. He wrote many times about the history and function of the modern university, and authored essays, sometimes the length of books, on topics like apartheid, Palestine, photography, architecture, and the nuclear arms race. The problems of political institutions remained a constant topic of consideration. As I said in class, he was a dear friend of Emmanuel Levinas, whose work he had both championed and critiqued when he, Derrida, was a young man, trying to find his own voice in the philosophical community. He was partly responsible for introducing Levinas to a wider world of social and political thinkers, making a powerful case for the significance of his work for a broad range of disciplines. Derrida had a huge impact on Levinas's work, but Levinas in turn deeply affected Derrida's thinking. In the presence of Levinas's work, for example, Derrida turned more decisively, beginning in the 1960s, to the question of the strangeness, unfathomability and

irrepressibility of the other. Conventional understandings of social and political life rest on the assumption that we must *recognize* each other to form more just and equitable communities; failing to be recognized for who you are is the root of horrifying forms of exclusion and violence. Derrida does not disagree. But after Levinas's work, he makes a powerful case too for the importance of recognizing the *unrecognizability* of the other; that is to say, among the many things to recognize about another person is their miraculous singularity, the degree to which who they are cannot be fathomed, grasped rationally, calculated, managed, or understood. For Derrida, tarrying with the *incomparability* of individuals is centrally important. After all, we never fully recognize *ourselves*, much less others. But rather than treating that fact as a loss or a problem, Derrida, after Levinas, celebrates it as the source of what makes each of us who we are: who we are is who we are not. Or: Who I am is not what I know. Or: what I know about myself is entirely wrapped up with what I do not and cannot know. It is what I do *not* know about myself that makes me who I am, yet the same *not*-knowing also *unmakes* me. I am made and unmade at the same time. And what on earth would it mean fully to know oneself or another? What would it mean to compel the other to be completely transparent to you or for you to make yourself completely transparent to yourself? For Derrida these are thought experiments that are worryingly totalitarian in nature, i.e., dreams of complete domination over oneself and others. Thank goodness they are only dreams, for the realization of these fantasies would be horrible, the stuff of dystopian stories of societies dominated by mind-control. You perhaps start to see why Derrida's work (and the work of others in the European tradition of which he is a part) calls for mind-bendingly new ways of thinking.

In addition to giving lectures and teaching classes across the world, Derrida gave regular seminars in Paris, including, near the end of his life, dozens of talks about the death penalty. As he pointed out, until recently, very few of Europe's most prominent social and political thinkers were opposed to the death penalty, a fact that Derrida finds at once troubling and telling. All of Derrida's seminars are now being translated and published, a project that is likely to continue for at least the next twenty years. *Of Hospitality*, the text we take up in our course, is drawn from two seminars from a semester-long series of discussions of the question of the guest and the host that Derrida gave in 1996. (The remainder of the seminars will finally be translated and published in late 2023.) Derrida in fact presented seminars in Paris annually for 43 years. These seminars are now being published in French and translated into English, for the most part the latest to earliest, about one seminar course per year. So long after I am dead, Derrida's seminars will continue to be released into the world. What a wonderful thought that is!

Derrida also wrote books about the work of individual philosophers, including Nietzsche, Heidegger, Hegel, Freud, and others. He always reads the work of others very closely and carefully, attending to the subtle paradoxes, queer tensions, and odd corners in their work, which he treats not as problems requiring fixing or as anomalies to be regretted or overcome but instead as neuralgic moments in a body of work that call for special patience and understanding. For it is here that the real life of a work thrums. That close attention to the strangeness haunting the work of thinkers--including the strangeness in his own work--he sometimes called deconstruction,

meaning, literally, the point in a work in which it is both securely constructed and trembling, as if palpably struggling to support itself under the weight of its own assumptions. Strictly speaking, deconstruction is not something you do to a text. You don't "deconstruct" something, although "deconstruction" in everyday language is often used that way. "Deconstruction" is instead a practice of knowledge whose purpose is to honour an instability that a text, a discourse, or a cultural practice endures or inflicts upon itself. This instability both supports and undermines a text, and Derrida developed a practice of knowledge that could attend to that paradox. Derrida's work keeps faith with these disturbances in thinking and writing and calls for others to do the same, not only because there is so much to learn from them but also because it is a way to remain hospitable to the singular uniqueness and otherness of another's ideas. In doing so, Derrida once again brings out a limitation in Levinas's work, as important as it is; otherness must include more than other human beings. Full disclosure: I was originally hired at McMaster specifically to teach "deconstruction."

Another way to think about deconstruction is this: deconstruction is the name for that moment when terms that seem like they are antithetical or oppositional in fact complicate each other and, as it were, *slide over each other*. Take the example of the "guest" and the "host," terms that are centrally important to the question and the practice of hospitality. At first glance they seem to be oppositional and in many ways they are oppositional: the "guest" depends on the "host's" good graces, and the "host" is the one who possesses the privilege to give succour and shelter to the "guest." But as we will see in a moment, the "guest" and the "host" in fact share a relationship that is much more complicated than that. The "guest" depends on the "host," yes, but the "host" also depends on the "guest." Moreover, the "host" offers gracious assistance, but that assistance is always tinged with some form of exclusion, even hostility towards the "guest." In hospitality, altruism and aggression are subtly mixed together, calling for a new language with which to describe social and political life. Moreover, "deconstruction" names the moment when oppositional terms—or "binaries," as they are called in humanities scholarship—turn out to be complexly bound up with each other. Other "binaries" where deconstruction happens (and that Derrida analyzes at length) include: "inside" / "outside;" "friend" / "enemy;" "purity" / "contamination;" "being" / "not-being;" "speech" / "writing;" "privacy" / "publicity;" "man" / "woman;" "clarity" / "obfuscation;" "straight" / "queer;" "legitimate nation-state" / "rogue nation-state;" "peace" / "war;" "reason" / "unreason;" "human" / "animal." Derrida was especially interested in and troubled by pairs of terms or binaries in which one term enjoyed (or was claimed by those in power to enjoy) a special authority or privilege. Deconstruction is the moment when that authority or privilege is shown to tremble or waver and shown to be manufactured rather than given. The object here is not to fuse the terms or synthesize them but to bring out how they complicate each other, how they are dependent upon each other, how they slide one over the other . . . and how we do everything we can to make them feel and function in a much less interfolded way than they in fact are.

Derrida was born in El Biar, in northern Algeria, in 1930: as he says in *Learning To Live Finally*,

his short interview with Jean Birnbaum just prior to his death in 2004 from pancreatic cancer, he is *a French Jew from Algeria born in the generation before the war of independence* (35). In his childhood and youth, Derrida endured the anti-Semitism that was endemic in the French colony, an anti-Semitism that only intensified during the Second World War, as local authorities scrambled to make themselves “useful” to the Nazis. Derrida recalls how members of his family may have been denied fundamental rights by the French authorities in Algeria but found support among their Muslim neighbours. Barred from the secular schools because he was Jewish, he attended a Jewish school, but soon grew disaffected with his education there. Many years later he said that his lifelong allergy to communities that laid claim to a common identity was triggered by these early experiences of different schools that were similarly founded on forms of exclusivity, both secular and religious. Indeed, as he says to Birnbaum, he has always hesitated to use the word “we,” not because he didn’t affirm forms of social and political solidarity, far from it, but because he worried about the important differences that sometimes got abolished or flattened in the name of affirming and defending a single, unified “we.” To Birnbaum he notes, for example, that he would never deny his Jewishness, never not say, *we Jews*, but that he could only say *we Jews* in the mode of a kind of *torment*, i.e., as an open question that calls for more thinking rather than an unqualified affirmation of an inviolable religious or cultural identity. You might recall that we’ve seen something like that in Jean Améry remarks (cited in Levi). The same holds true, Derrida notes, for sentiments like *we French* or *we Europeans* (40). Like Levinas, he acknowledges the “exhausted” qualities of “Europe,” the paths of destruction and self-destruction that it has taken. (Levinas says something similar in “Peace and Proximity.” Where in that essay and in what context?) But he often argued—for example, in a remarkable book entitled *The Other Heading*—that there were still new forms of political and social life to be unfurled in the idea of “Europe,” and in particular ways of thinking about belonging that were no longer answerable to conventional notions of statehood, citizenship, and sovereign power. He thus speaks of a *Europe to come*, meaning not some dreamy future Europe but the unexpected possibilities that exist in the Europe that we have today. He actively sought ways to shelter *a relation of Europe to itself as an experience of radical alterity* (44-5), i.e., to tarry with and give a voice to transformative forms of otherness—other ideas, other forms of politics, other forms of respect, other forms of belonging, other practices of knowledge—that hitherto lay dormant in the exhausted and depleted idea of “Europe.” These alterities can sometimes feel as if they are coming from the future but they could just as easily be said to come from the past. What matters to Derrida is the “elsewheres” that haunt and trouble “here.”

In this course, we’ve seen how the long history of social and political thought is threaded together with this common problem and question, namely, the work it takes to unfurl new meanings from old words or words whose meaning we may too quickly have decided we know what they mean . . . especially words that are foundational to social and political life. For social and political thinkers, what is important is tarrying with concepts, practices, and meanings in a state of “torment” rather than “complacency,” thoughtful engagement rather than “dogma.” Examples in this course include:

Justice (West, Nussbaum)  
 Revolution (Hardt)  
 Human (Levi, Butler, Taylor, Foucault)  
 Power (Foucault)  
 Nature (Žižek)  
 Animals (Singer)  
 Democracy (Hardt)  
 Ability, Capability (Nussbaum, Taylor)

In truth, many of these concepts link together the entire course. For example, we've never strayed very far from the labour of doing justice to justice. In one way or another, every thinker on this course has engaged that question. So too have all the thinkers engaged the question of what it means to be "human." As Butler says in conversation with Sunaura Taylor, quoting Spinoza and Deleuze, "we do not know what a body can do," meaning that it isn't pre-ordained what being human can mean . . . and thank goodness for that. The minute we begin to determine what it means to be human, we are normatively determining what it means *not* to be human . . . and history has proven that the very worst consequences flow from that sort of exclusionary practice. Determining what constitutes the human or new ways of being human *or* what happens when individuals or communities are relegated to the condition of being less-than-human are each overlapping questions that we've considered throughout this course. As you prepare for the final examination, one way to consolidate your knowledge of the course will be to gather the course together under, for example, the aegis of "the human." What are the specific social and political conditions in which human beings are denied their humanity? What are the different ways in which what it means to be human is administered, policed, normatively controlled, and produced? What specific social and political practices affirm the human and help ensure the flourishing of the human? What is the nature of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman—the environment, or nonhuman animals, or human beings deemed to be less than human? What do social and political theorists say about the moment that the "full" human being emerges . . . or is imagined to emerge from some pre-existing condition, the "state of nature," for example? What constitutes or defines or determines the "fully human" for some of the theorists that we've considered?

While we are on the subject of gathering together the course's various materials, let me pause for a moment to return to a question I've raised many times in class, namely, what is the importance of the *form* or *genre* of the work of a social and political thinker? In what specific ways does a thinker's choice of a particular *kind* of writing shape their practice of knowledge? Remember that the form of a thinker's writing isn't an empty container that they fill with thought but is in a dynamic relationship with that thought, shaping it and in turn shaped by it. How so? Consider the wide range of different sorts of work that we've considered or will consider on this course:

Dialogue (West, Butler, Taylor, Singer, Nussbaum, Butler, Žižek, Ronell, Hardt, Appiah)  
 Letters (Simpson and Maynard)

Lecture (Foucault)  
Autobiography / Testimony (Levi)

Now, to return to our discussion of Derrida, after the Second World War, he made his way from Algeria to France, where he was often a diffident and uncertain undergraduate student, subject to bouts of clinical depression and perhaps still partly hanging on to the dream of his teenage years of becoming a soccer player. He eventually gained entrance to one of the most important universities in the world, the École Normale Supérieure, where he studied philosophy and where he would eventually teach philosophy, among other subjects. He always felt like an outsider to the discipline for which he also seems to have been uniquely suited, and always deeply restless within the institution of which he was also the most ferocious defender. In 1983 he co-founded the Collège Internationale de Philosophie, an institution domiciled in Paris where lecture courses, open to the public, were offered by philosophers on a volunteer basis. Derrida passed away in 2004 of pancreatic cancer. He was always and is still a very controversial figure, and was sometimes characterized as a dangerous influence, especially on the minds of youth. He was a modern day Socrates, a thinker “out of place” (if you recall what I said in my Study Notes for Plato) but perfectly comfortable living and thinking there. Perhaps it is that affinity with Socrates that explains why he wrote so beautifully and meaningfully about Plato. Yet in person Derrida was an uncommonly gracious person, practising the hospitality towards others that also forms the subject of the seminars we take up here. As busy as he most certainly was, he always answered my letters to him.

### ***Of Hospitality***

Let us say yes to who or what turns up before any determination or anticipation, whether or not it is to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an uninvited guest, an unexpected visitor. Whether or not this new arrival, visitor, is the citizen of another country, human, animal or divine, a living or dead thing, male or female.

–Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*

The growing interest in the concept of the guest and the host central to the question of hospitality is part of a larger shift in social and political thought towards alternative terms with which to think about what it means to belong or not belong to a community. An ancient tradition tells us that elementally speaking, social and political life is about protecting one’s own and defending against one’s enemies. But the friend/enemy distinction is profoundly limited, as even Plato pointed out several thousand years ago: to use this distinction is to found community on violence and exclusion. For those of you who took 3Q03 with me, you might recall that we’ve already seen an exploration of this question in the work of the great 18<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher, Immanuel Kant. (Kant frames the body of his pamphlet, *Perpetual Peace* [1795], with remarks about guests and hosts in the form of a strange joke about arriving at an inn called “Perpetual Peace” that has a sign over the front door depicting a grave yard! Is there no escape from war, he asks, is there no peace except the peace of the grave?) These alternative terms for social and political life include

“the neighbour,” i.e., the person who is nearby but not kin, and so the one who is at once proximate and at a distance. Like the guest, the neighbour has an ancient, cross-cultural provenance in social and political life, including important reflections on the question in both testaments of the bible (see, for example, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Luke). The turn or perhaps re-turn to older ideas about belonging registers an impatience with some of the dominant terms governing how social and political life is lived and imagined, namely the *friend* and the *enemy*. The guest who is granted—under certain conditions; there are always conditions—asylum, safe passage, or residency is not easily described using only the language of the friend and the enemy, which tends to be more straightforwardly exclusive. Moreover, to re-imagine social and political life in terms of the host offering sanctuary to the guest unsettles the confidence often placed in the notion that the element of social and political life, the fundamental unit of that life, is the autonomous subject, the “self-made man,” the one who is affirmed for standing freely alone. To think of communities in terms of hosts and guests is a key way of underlining the *interdependence* of social and political life, something that thinkers like Nussbaum, Butler, and Levinas also explore. To be a citizen of a nation-state remains important, and perhaps never more so in a world in which so many human beings are denied the rights that come with citizenship. But beyond citizenship or perhaps to the side of citizenship, there may be other possibilities, other ways of thinking about what it means to belong to a community, and what it means to govern and be governed. Kant had made a step towards this consideration by beginning *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795) by evoking the image of a host who offers a complex welcome to guests, and later in the text, when he outlines the “rights of hospitality” or “cosmopolitical rights,” i.e., the rights that human beings have not as citizens of particular nations but as citizens of the world. But for Derrida, Kant’s notion of hospitality and “cosmopolitical rights” remains too resolutely tied to the nation-state and to citizenship. What about ways of respectful, just and democratic ways of belonging not entirely routed through the nation-state and the citizen? As Derrida says in *Islam and the West*, “I have nothing against citizenship, but I dare to dream of a democracy that is not simply tied to a nation-state and to citizenship. And it is under these conditions that one can speak of a universal democracy, a democracy that is not only cosmopolitical but universal” (xix, 44).

But why then is the question of the guest, the neighbour, and the stranger--and thus the question of the borders across which these creatures cross--on our radar now? That’s a question whose motivation you’ve already seen many times on the course; i.e., why does a certain question emerge when it does? What are the local circumstances that make a particular problem or question especially pressing? So why is the question of the host and the guest significant today? How is the very idea of preserving the sanctity and security and stability of the nation-state destabilized or under threat or open to rethinking, for better or for worse, today? --A few possible answers:

1) We live in an age characterized by the movement of vast populations of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons--men, women and children who have been deprived of the protections of citizenship or perhaps never were afforded them in the first place, peoples whose

country of origin offer little or no protection and who indeed face state-sponsored forms of violence. Economic inequality, ecological devastation, civil war, forms of “ethnic-cleansing,” among other catastrophes, have led to a vast de-territorialization of peoples who must seek refuge and a home elsewhere than home. The problems that accompany seeking a home elsewhere than home is a theme to which Derrida returns repeatedly in his seminars on hospitality. These migrations of peoples are too often met with suspicion, xenophobia, and violence. Many European nations, for example, are led by political parties that were elected on a platform rooted in closing borders and denying migrants safe passage. Groups seeking to help migrants with basic necessities like food, water, medical care, and shelter face criminal charges. As the great British-Caribbean social and political thinker, Stuart Hall, argues, mass migration “is the dark side...the unacknowledged underbelly...of globalization, where everything moves—capital, goods, elites, images, *currencies—and only people and labour are supposed to stay put*” (quoted by Rose, “The Analyst,” *NYRB* 21 Sept 2023). Do you see the double-standard at work here, and how targets and wounds migrants? Corporations want and need capital and goods to move freely around the world; but when people and labour start to move, states deem this instability to a problem. Capital must be mobile; but not people, and not out of the control of capital.

2) The intensification of the flows of global capital and the growth of ever larger and more powerful trans-national corporations contest the authority and the legitimacy and the borders of the conventional nation-state. Think Exxon, Microsoft, Apple, and Amazon. And yet, as Derrida and others point out, capital may move globally but it does so at a time that has seen the enormous increase of inequality world-wide, not least of which is a widening distance between the wealthy and the impoverished. That’s one of the reasons why Derrida is reluctant to use the word “globalization,” which he felt elided those gross differences under the banner of a mythical “globe,” a single world supposedly unified by capital. Derrida is not alone among social and political thinkers to point out that what we call “the world” is only “a world,” one founded on and created to buttress chattel slavery and extractive capitalism. There are, in fact, *many* worlds, but we happen to live in one part of Earth dominated by single, powerful, and unifying view of the planet, i.e., a world that has been compelled to serve the interests of slavery and capitalism. “A world,” only one of many, was thereby transformed into “*the* world.” As McMaster’s Dr. Susan Searls Giroux points out, we shouldn’t forget that there are more slaves today in the world than at any other moment in human history: slaves constitute the most terribly egregious inequality, the point that divides the planet into those who have nothing, not even their own lives, from those who possess those lives or who profit from them absolutely. The flows of global capital include the global trafficking in human beings, slaves for whom citizenship in a nation-state has offered no protection.

3) The cross-border movement of capital takes place at the same time as the emergence of violent political movements and criminal organizations that aren’t necessarily tied to a particular nation-state. Think Al-Qaeda or ISIS or the drug cartels.

4) And yet, much more positively, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has also witnessed the intensification of organized indigenous political movements, movements that can cross international borders and that can actively contest the national aims and dreams of settler cultures. Indigenous peoples constitute “counter-histories” (to use Foucault’s term) that throw into question the narratives of progress, development, consolidation, and “rightful” ownership associated with the histories of settlers and settler nations. We saw a founding example of that settler narrative in Locke. (How so?)

In the last section of Kant’s *Towards Perpetual Peace* Kant expresses his disgust with his fellow Europeans and with their violent mistreatment of the indigenous peoples of other lands, their utter failure to be good “guests.” The Europeans are guests, he remarks, who fail to acknowledge that the lands they colonize are even populated by hosts. (And yet in the years immediately prior to his remarks about settler-colonial violence in *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Kant had said scandalously wounding things about Black people.)

And you might also recall how more and more public gatherings now begin with what is called the “First Nation Protocol:” as a speaker or moderator of a public event, non-indigenous or indigenous, you open by thanking “the host nation” before beginning to speak, i.e., you start by offering gratitude to the Nation on whose lands you are holding your gathering, thereby positioning you and those gathered in your name as a guest in another’s “home.” (See: <https://www.ictinc.ca/first-nation-protocol-thanking-host-first-nation> ) Elders from or representatives of a First Nation are also increasingly asked formally to welcome guests to that First Nation’s land. (But is a “First Nation” a “nation,” or do indigenous peoples create forms of belonging not easily described using a Eurocentric term like “nation”? Simpson’s work contests the use of “nation” to describe “First Nations.”)

Many communications on campus now include the following sentence—a statement that positions McMaster University as a guest in the lands of indigenous hosts: *McMaster University recognizes and acknowledges that it is located on the traditional territories of the Mississauga and Haudenosaunee nations, and within the lands protected by the ‘Dish With One Spoon’ wampum agreement.* Some colleagues at McMaster use the following statement, one that underlines how non-Indigenous members of the McMaster community are “guests” of a very particular kind, i.e., unasked: *I live and work as a settler and uninvited guest on the traditional territories shared between the Haudenosaunee confederacy and the Anishinaabe nations recognized by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum agreement.* Many things that flow from declaring oneself to be an “uninvited guest,” including an acknowledgment that you arrived without being asked and that your presence is in some sense transgressive, a form of trespass. Yet you remain a “guest,” i.e., welcomed by hosts who graciously and momentarily overlook your lack of courtesy. —A potentially disruptive reversal occurs: the “settler” is in a position of authority, able to claim this land as the place where she “live[s] and work[s],” also owns up to the precariousness of that claim, for if she was not invited to be here then this is not her place to claim.

Communications advertizing visiting speakers at the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, B.C. include the following: *This event will take place on the unceded Coast Salish territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.*

Consider the meaning of “unceded” here: it points to the fact that aboriginal title to the land upon which the university sits has neither been surrendered nor acquired by the Crown. To acknowledge that the land is “unceded” reminds everyone that both the visiting speaker and the university host of the visiting speaker are guests on the lands of the Coast Salish peoples.

For a thoughtful reflection on the question of the politics of land acknowledgments, see Stephen Marche, “Canada’s Impossible Acknowledgment” (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/canadas-impossible-acknowledgment>)

Hazel V. Carby, emeritus professor of African American studies at Yale, raises an important point about these land acknowledgements: “The criticism that might be made of statements like this . . . is that they are rarely written in collaboration with the elders of Indigenous communities; instead, they relegate indigeneity to an eternal past while avoiding the pressing issue of Indigenous sovereignty in the present. They obscure, rather than promote, attempts to expand our intellectual, cultural and geographic horizons . . .” (“We must burn them,” *London Review of Books* 26 May 2022, p.14).

5) The situation in Europe, both today and when Derrida gave his seminars on the question of hospitality, is strange: populations or refugees are on the move, while at the same time the European Union strives to lower barriers between nations for the purposes of employment, residency, voter’s rights, and the movement of goods, among other things. Yet many nation-states adopt defensive stances by insisting on the sanctity of their borders. As Derrida points out, various *protectionisms* today are caught up in the complexities of the question of hospitality. Under these conditions, nations declare that *Anyone who encroaches 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* (54, 55). The politics of walled exclusion make the question of hospitality more pressing and complicated than ever. The American political theorist, Bonnie Honig, captures the convolutions of the scene best: “The new porousness of territorial boundaries among EU countries has been accompanied in recent years by the erection of new, not at all porous borders inside the EU. The hosts are not only welcoming; they are also hostile” (in Seyla Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism* 108). Here we might recall that Derrida points to the work of Emile Benveniste, the influential Syrian born French linguist and semiotician. It was Benveniste who first spoke of the curious double meaning of the Latin word, *hostis*, the word that forms the root of “hospitality.” *Hostis* means both “guest” and “enemy.” Early on, Benveniste discovered, *hostis* primarily meant “guest” but over time it came to mean “enemy.” Derrida, like Benveniste, is fascinated by these strange examples of language carrying opposite meanings. What is a “host” such that the stranger can be named a “guest” and an “enemy”? (Fyi, another example of a word taking on opposite meanings is the German term, *unheimlich*, “uncanny.” Freud observes that the term has historically meant both strange, other worldly, ghostly *and* “of the home and hearth,” and “that which is familiar.” Is the uncanniest guest, the one that disrupts and haunts the most, then, the one that haunts the home from within?)

In Derrida’s hands, seven overlapping points are worth remembering about the concept and the practice of hospitality. A close and careful reading of the text will lead you to those moments in

which each of these points are evoked or discussed:

1) Hospitality is conditional or *juridical*, i.e., it is governed by codes, protocols, conventions, historical precedents, and laws that are designed specifically to determine “rightful” and “illegal” crossings across borders. (Recall here Foucault’s point about the “juridical” discourses that dominate discussions of sovereign power, i.e., all the social and political thought that is obsessed with the question of the “rightful” nature of authority, or its “illegal” seizure, the “rightful” overthrow of authority, etc.. For Foucault, as we saw, that particular lens on the nature of authority is distorting because it fails to take account of the many other ways in which power works.) Understanding how hospitality works or does not work always means wrestling with the significance of the contexts in which it takes place.

2) Since classical and biblical antiquity, strangers arriving at the door or shore of the homeland have been accorded certain rights. See, for example, Leviticus 19: 33-34, in which God reminds the Israelites to be gracious and giving hosts to strangers because they themselves had once been strangers, prisoners in Egypt. (In the background is an important thought: every host can at some point become a guest, and every guest may become a host. These positions are reversible and transposable.) So hospitality is one of those rare examples of a cross-cultural and trans-historical practice, i.e., something that many cultures across the world and throughout time have had a stake in. Hospitality seems in many ways a universally important phenomenon, even if each expression of it is determined by local circumstances.

3) Hospitality is governed by systems of exchange, i.e., it is offered to the stranger or the guest but only in the form of a kind of trade. This trade or exchange can take many forms, some benign, others much less so. The terms of the exchange are wholly dominated by the host—meaning that the guest must cede a very great deal, from the start, to the host as the basic condition of the host then ceding something to the guest. Hospitality mixes welcome with hostility, which is why Derrida sometimes speaks of what he calls “*hostipitality*,” that is, he invents a new word that combines a blow with an outreached hand. For example:

a) “I will offer you sanctuary but you must give me something in return, beginning with your name and your place of origin and your history. Moreover, you must agree to answer my questions on my terms and in my language.”

b) “I will offer you sanctuary but you must promise to bring a certain amount of capital to my country with you.”

c) “I will offer you sanctuary but you may not be HIV positive. You may have advanced cardiovascular disease or cancer or any number of other significant and costly non-communicable health problems that will add to the “burden” on my health-care system (and do remember that it is “mine” to have, not ours to share), but about HIV, well, I must draw the line.” (It was only in January 2010 that President Barack Obama lifted the longstanding ban on HIV+ *visitors* to the

United States. Insofar as immigration officials provided a rationale for this exclusion, the claim was sometimes that HIV was “communicable.” But there is no science to support this claim. HIV is of course transmissible, as the tens of millions of infections and about 40 million dead of AIDS related complications world-wide attest. But it is not communicable in the manner of, say, COVID-19 or the measles.) The host: “Do you, as an HIV+ person or someone my border agents suspect is HIV+ or someone who is an ally of HIV+ persons, feel that is unfair and unjust, this seemingly arbitrary drawing of a line dividing “good” health-care problems from “bad” ones? Perhaps. But it is important for you to understand that it is important to me, the host, to repeatedly call attention to my authority to decide who is worthy of being a guest and who is not. What matters is less who is worthy of being admitted to my lands and who is not, and much more that I am seen to be the one with the power to decide which is which. The fact that some will not be permitted to cross my border is, in a way, merely a by-product of me announcing my sovereign authority so that all may hear. I am who I am insofar as I make those decisions; the actual, on-the-ground results (‘this person may be admitted to my lands; but that person may not; this person is allowed to visit my lands; that person will be expelled if I discover them to be HIV+’) isn’t nearly as important as making everyone, inside and outside the homeland, know that I decide, I am the one who decides, I alone have the power to make these decisions. What matters more than the fate of any individual guest petitioning me to cross my border is for everyone to see the full power of me, the host. Precisely how my power is wielded is superceded by that fact that I am seen to be the one who wields it. Indeed, the very arbitrariness of my decision, the fact that it isn’t the result of universally acceptable compassionate reasoning (i.e., all strangers, irregardless of their health status, deserve succour and respite in my lands) but, quite to the contrary, an expression of my absolute authority over strangers, is what matters most because it says: as host, I get to dictate the terms of the encounter with the stranger; I am not guided by or dictated to by rules or expectations outside of myself, expectations, like, for example, ‘because you are a human being on my shores I owe you sanctuary.’ In this way, letting strangers arrive on my shore shores up my authority as host; deciding which strangers get to cross my border, deciding that some may do so and others may not, and doing so based on poorly reasoned distinctions between ‘dangerous’ or ‘burdensome’ illnesses and illnesses that are deemed to be ‘safe,’ shores up my authority much more. As host I am not going to be held accountable to humane notions of equality (i.e., “our illnesses do not define us;” “everyone, regardless of their health, should be treated the same” at the border) because I am not accountable to anything or anyone but myself. To be the protector, I must determine from whom you need protection and from whom you need no protection.” What do you make of this host’s logic?

It is worth emphasizing here that for the communities most directly affected by HIV immigration laws and many other, closely related, forms of state-sponsored discrimination in which the civil liberties of individuals were suddenly wiped out, this moment in history was a turning point: the state’s behaviour regarding HIV/AIDS, its carelessness, ended up forming a valuable lesson for HIV+ individuals and their allies, because it served as a stern reminder that at any moment the state can withdraw its support or protection, it can at any moment arbitrarily deem a certain community to be “threatening” or “dangerous,” thereby encouraging citizens to feel and think the same way. The communities of gay men in the U.S., for example, had, by the

1970s, pinned their political hopes on a conventional liberal model in which the rights accorded citizens would finally be granted to them: freedom from discrimination in law, the workplace, etc.. The liberal tent would simply be widened to include these previously disenfranchised people. But HIV/AIDS made a very different point abundantly clear: the liberal tent could just as easily be shrunken, closed off to others; rights could not only be denied but in fact rolled back! Gay men (and other groups disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS) could no longer count on a liberal democratic country like the U.S. gradually becoming, with some prodding, more liberal and more democratic. It could, in fact, turn in the opposite direction and become more illiberal and undemocratic, as, for example, gay men with HIV or living with AIDS discovered: they were summarily fired from their jobs, denied housing, expelled from their families, and treated as contaminated and dangerous. So some of the major tactics of political movements by minorities changed radically during the emergence of the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s, movements now much less reliant on the idea that 1) changes in the law automatically mean changes in structures of oppression and that 2) changes in the law are always progressive.

In the U.S. you may not enter the armed forces if you are HIV+, even if you are a student in a military academy. If you take HIV meds and remain undetectable (such people do not transmit the virus through sex, a fact referred to as Undetectable Equals Untransmittable, or U=U), and even if you are healthy and have no physical limitations, you are deemed unsuitable for the military simply because of your HIV status. The host's rules always govern whether and how a guest crosses a threshold. In this case we have a curious situation in which the host refuses a particular "kind" of guest because that guest is playing host to a viral guest. What do you think is the origin of these rules?

Question: but if the illness is communicable, a COVID-19 infection, for example, should a stranger be denied the role of a guest by the host? What are the limits of hospitality if the guest poses a clear and present danger to the health of the host? How does the host distinguish between actual dangers—say, infectious diseases whose threat is backed up by scientific research—and manufactured dangers (an example of the latter would be former President T\*\*\* calling impoverished and exhausted refugees from Central America “rapists and drug-traffickers”)? HIV+ persons do not threaten the social body of the U.S.. But they were represented as a threat. But the fact that a nation feels the need, from time to time, to invent threats coming from the “outside” only serves to remind us that the host isn't self-sufficient; the host “needs” this supposedly threatening other to build itself up. (And let us not forget that HIV+ persons who are immuno-compromised are in fact far more vulnerable to others than a threat to them.)

Here is another question worth considering: HIV+ visitors were declared a threat at the same historical moment in the U.S. that saw the wholesale deregulation of the economy and massive cuts to social services—the advent of neoliberalism. An already precarious public health system was made more precarious, while for-profit health-care services surged ahead, making unprecedented profits while leaving millions of citizens with little or no health insurance. In the 1980s, President Regan declared that the “problem” was “government,” any entity that looks after the public or that stands for the public good is an impediment to progress, which, it is assumed, depends on the energies and competence and good luck of individuals. At the same time, HIV+

visitors (and, indeed HIV+ citizens within the U.S.) were publically declared to be enemies of the state, unfairly “taking” resources away from the health care system and a danger to “the public.” But what system was that? What danger? And in an America otherwise committed to privatization, what public? Without a robustly affirmed notion of a public and without a public health care system, the state had in fact relieved itself of the responsibility of caring for its own citizens: as never before, it was now every person for themselves, but especially if you were HIV+ or were living with AIDS. But the state still had a stake in fostering the *illusion* of standing by the health and welfare of its citizens . . . and put HIV+ persons to use for that task. The state could say that “We are here to protect you, the public, from HIV!,” knowing full well that the public health system in the U.S., and, indeed, the very idea of shared responsibilities and the common good that are the basis of “the public,” were now in tatters. Social services and the notion of a public good that had been an entrenched fact of American life since the New Deal in the 1930s had been dismantled in the name of making a new “free” and “prosperous” nation of rugged individuals who did not need or want the government or the idea of a public good. So, it may well be that the scare tactics around HIV+ persons were designed to invent something else as well—i.e., the mirage of a robust and intact public health care system and a presumed-to-be “healthy” “public” for which, then, HIV+ persons could be said to be a threat. In this way, the state invents a threat so as to create the mirage of a health-care system and a public that is “worthy” of being attacked. HIV+ visitors and residents are invented as a danger to a “public,” the very idea of which is in fact under siege amid the predations of neoliberal capitalism, which seeks to destroy the notion of a common good by replacing it with the idea that, in the end, *individuals* come first. In other words, the host who makes a stranger a threat also uses the stranger to make itself worthy of being threatened. Existing political theory struggles to describe phenomenon like this, in which hosts and guests are so complexly braided with each other. But it can be no accident that in worrying the arrival of HIV+ persons at the border or within the borders the state asserts its authority specifically around the surveillance, policing, and administration of the *life* of individuals and communities. Authority can hardly express itself more clearly and succinctly than in the form of a grave and penetrative concern about health and well-being, whether in strangers or familiars. As Foucault argues in the influential last lecture of *Society must be defended*, modern forms of power often come in the shape of what he calls “bio-power,” i.e., power that is control through the apprehension of the “life” (*bios*) of persons, power that compels subjects to be answerable to authority primarily but latching on to their “life,” meaning their health and well-being, their capacity to be productive or delinquent, “safe” or “infectious,” a team-player who contributes to the vitality of the nation or an insurgent who threatens the nation, sapping it of its productivity and progress.

d) “I will offer you sanctuary not because you are a stranger in need but only because you may be a god disguised as a human being, and I want to make sure that I don’t inadvertently turn a god away from my door.” This was part of the reasoning behind classical Athenian forms of hospitality. Here’s hospitality has nothing to do with helping others but instead is about helping oneself. But is hospitality ever *not* about helping yourself, shoring up your representation, protecting your present and future interests?

e) “I will offer you freedom and sanctuary here in the homeland, even if elsewhere, in the colonies, you have been bought and sold as mere property, a slave, i.e., an object or commodity that is neither free nor unfree but instead an inert possession of the master. If you escape the place in the world where you are owned by an other as slave, and somehow make your way to the homeland, you will not longer be enslaved but instead free, supposedly like everyone else in the homeland who calls that land home. But at the moment my offer of freedom is complicated. Many in the homeland do not see how it is that in the colonies, far from the homeland, you can be property rather than a human being, but then, once you step foot on the shores of the homeland, you can be welcomed as a human being and be free, now *unenslaved*.” This was the nature of the debate in the courts and legislatures of England during the late 1700s: Do Englanders welcome slaves with liberty or do they treat them as property, as they were when they kidnapped Africans and transported them in awful conditions across the Atlantic Ocean? But isn’t freedom intrinsic to being human and not something a host can “give” a guest? Can freedom be “given” to a guest if that guest is not a guest but a commodity, to be used by its owner at will? How can a host promise freedom to a guest in one part of the world—i.e., in England—but refuse that freedom in another part—i.e., in the colonies or along the west coast of Africa? In offering you freedom, the homelander thinks, “I am mostly interested in shoring up my image of myself as a country of undeniable rights and freedoms, a country founded by the rule of law--the law applies equally to everyone--and by *habeaus corpus*--no one can be illegally detained. Declaring my commitment to universal freedom, freedom for all, is a central part of my state-building project. But if I am responsible for freeing slaves, I also attack the very foundations of the homeland, which has for centuries has thrived on forcibly extracting labour from slaves. The entire economy, in fact, could not function without slavery. So that which builds me up also threatens to tear me down.” This is the horrifying and wounding calculus that many Britons were weighing as the 18<sup>th</sup> century drew to a close. Question: Is slavery a moral issue, i.e., a question of affirming or denying human dignity? Or is this an economic issue, i.e., a question of maintaining the interlocking structures that make the homeland commercially viable and a strong actor in world politics? Is the state there primarily to protect private property, as Locke and others maintain, or is it there to protect and affirm human dignity? The gross inhospitality of chattel slavery raises these questions with particular clarity and force.

4) Hospitality means ceding your place to the other. But it is also a means by which to define the homeland against the other. “I offer you sanctuary here in my home” defines “my home” as that place willing and able to offer sanctuary in the first place. Each time I welcome you, I emphasize that you are welcomed here, in this place, my home, on my terms. The intensification of the rules and regulations governing you crossing my border not only define you in a certain way; they also define me, they contribute hugely to how I see myself and how I want to see myself seen by others. “Society must be defended!,” to remember the phrase Foucault remembers as the phrase that a nation uses to affirm itself, its sense of itself, its supposedly pure integrity, by declaring itself to be at war with the others who threaten it. Just think of all the awful violence perpetrated in the name of the call for “society to defend itself.” Another way to consider this quality of hospitality is this: only those who possess the privilege of authority

possess the privilege of relinquishing, even momentarily, that authority, by giving over a piece of themselves to a stranger. Among the many privileges that come from having authority is the authority to give up some of that authority in acts of hospitality. So hospitality is imbued with authority and in fact, paradoxically, shores up that authority at the precise moment that it is being relinquished. “Deconstruction” of the sort that Derrida exemplifies is a practice of knowledge by which to understand how one thing can be two, opposite things: how, in this instance, authority or sovereignty, i.e., the capacity to rule oneself, to be one’s own arbiter, to be self-possessed, can be built up and taken down—constructed and destroyed, hence *de-construction*—at the same time and in the same gesture. Formal logic and a great part of “Western” philosophy declares that something cannot be and not be at the same time. Deconstruction begs to differ, but the means by which to ascertain this curious doubleness—for how can something be and not be at the same times?—are relatively scarce.

“The thousands of migrants who have lost their lives in the Mediterranean are precisely lives that are not deemed worthy of safeguarding. Those waters are monitored for the purposes of trade and maritime safety; there is often cell coverage. So, how many countries have to disavow responsibility in order for those people be left to die? Even if we could track the decision not to send help to boats in distress to this or that functionary from a European government, we would not quite grasp the large-scale policy that effectively lets populations die, *that would rather let them die than let them in.*” –Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence* (120)



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5) Yet this means that in some fundamental way, I also need the Other, the Stranger, to be who I claim to be and for my place, my home, to be what it is. I define myself and claim a certain self-possessed authority by virtue of being the one decides if the stranger at my door is an enemy to be refused entry or a friend welcomed as a guest. What matters is that the host enters into relations with others to be the particular creature that she or he is. What enables the host to be singularly the host is also what prevents that host from being entirely autonomous, independent, self-

possessed. Under these conditions, the distinction between the host and the guest begins to tremble, but in a very particular way: **the host becomes the guest of the guest and the guest becomes the host of the host (123, 125)**. That is not the same thing as saying the host and the guest dissolve into each other. How so? For the purposes of understanding Derrida on the question of hospitality, it will be important to understand this fine-grained point.

Notice how difficult it is to hold this foreign thought in your head, how hard it is to accommodate this rude and unruly guest in your “home:” “the host becomes the guest of the guest and the guest becomes the host of the host.” Derrida’s work brims with these sorts of alien thoughts and with the attempt to endure the agony of their arrival. Now, the reason why they are hard to hold in your head is not because of any “weakness” on your part. No, the reason why deconstructive thoughts always feel like they are in the process of slipping away (a bit like a dream that, when you wake up, feels momentarily very vivid but moments later dissolves into forgetfulness) is because several thousand years of Western philosophy is marshalled against you holding on to them. It is the strength of that tradition that is the problem, not any incompetence on your part. Deconstructive thoughts are like the “Foreigner” or “Stranger” who haunts the community of Athenian philosophers that taught us to think in terms of cleanly divided binary terms. (See below for a discussion of Derrida’s interest in these seminars in the disturbing arrival of the “Foreigner” or “Stranger” on the shores of “Greece.”) When you start thinking deconstructively, you are in effect thinking “Jerusalem” (to use a metaphor from the work of Derrida’s friend, the philosopher and Talmudic scholar, Emmanuel Levinas) in the land of “Greece” or “Athens.” “Athens” programs us to think in certain ways. “Jerusalem” offers an “other heading,” (*L’autre cap*), as Derrida puts it elsewhere: *other heading* meaning the different and unexpected direction, but also the direction guided by the “other” as well as the “other” that I become once turned towards “the other.” (And in all rigour, when am I not turned toward the other, when am I truly the liberal, autonomous subject or citizen?) But “Athens” and “Greece” cannot be disentangled from “Jerusalem” either. So thinking deconstructively is a struggle without end, an open-ended practice, not a destination or an accomplishment.

We are reminded that no host can be absolutely autonomous, completely independent of others. That is why there is so much anxiety and warring aggression around the question of borders and border-crossers, as if violently reacting to the realization that we live interdependent lives, no matter how high we build our walls or how strict our immigration policies are. Is it the arrival of the stranger that is threatening? Or is it the real threat the loss of “me” or “we,” i.e. of certain versions of “me” or “we” that are imagined to be safe from change at the hands of others?

What then are the large and the small ways in which we can cede our place to others and in doing so become something new, something that changes the very idea of who “we” imagine ourselves to be? Hospitality means thinking and acting in earnest of unprecedented forms of belonging. The host must suffer mutations and transformations, even as the guest must change. Speaking of the land to which he belongs, Derrida will call this change the *Europe to come* or Europe’s *other heading*. Hospitality stems from the incorrigible need to do justice to others and to seek practical and meaningful means to accomplish that task, a task that is intrinsically never-ending and inexhaustible. The thought of hospitality encourages those of us blessed with living in relatively peaceful and verdant conditions that the world is also a murderously

precarious place, and that we share that world and that we are obliged not to bunker down behind our borders coveting our portion of it.

6) Hospitality is conditional, yes, but even to say it is conditional is already to have described it in the context of an unconditional hospitality, a pure or absolute hospitality without any conditions. Conditional hospitality requires the idea of an unconditional hospitality for its conditions to be conditions. Yet unconditional hospitality is all but impossible to imagine, much less practice. For Derrida, absolute hospitality would mean that the host would give himself or herself-- *completely and without qualifications or conditions of any kind* – over to the needs and demands of the guest. But that gesture would in effect dissolve the host, meaning that there would be nothing left of offer hospitality to a guest. Absolute hospitality remains the virtual horizon against which various conditional forms of hospitality take place. So, in Derrida’s seminar, hospitality is part of two distinct yet somehow connected orders, one conditional and the other unconditional. These two orders exist together. Unconditional hospitality means handing oneself over to the stranger (the stranger-person, the stranger-idea, the stranger-history, etc.) in such an absolute, unqualified way that that person threatens their very ability to be a host: you give away everything, including being a host to a guest (*Of Hospitality* 25-27). Conditional hospitality, on the other hand, is always qualified—a giving over to the stranger or guest, yes, but always within certain limitations, using certain conventions, making certain calculations. Under these conditions, hospitality is offered to the guest but only within prescribed limits: the host must be careful not to give up so much that he or she is dispossessed of the resources that enable the host to be the host in the first place. Kant severely limits hospitality because he doesn’t want to risk this kind of dispossession. Derrida confronts this possibility more frankly than Kant, bringing into legibility what remains obscured in Kant’s argument: i.e., that every act of hospitality is tinged with hostility. Kant argues that hospitality is a matter of *right*, meaning that, in all rigour, it is offered for principled reasons, and thus anchored in universal notions of what is right and good. Kant insists that the hospitality he is talking about isn’t just a matter of *philanthropy* (as he puts it), meaning benevolence or kindness to strangers—which of course is wonderful too, but for Kant far too contingent, resting way too much on the whims of individuals who might, under different circumstances, decide to be less kind, less philanthropic. Remember that human rights aren’t afforded to individuals out of the goodness of our hearts; no, we observe these rights, and respect them, because they are rights, i.e., out of shared rational principles rather than out of generosity. True hospitality for Kant is not being “humane” or “gracious” or “benevolent” to the stranger but an act and an offer that is *principled* in nature, which for Kant means that hospitality properly speaking springs from the fact that we are rational beings who deserve to thrive in a rational world in which each and every person is free and respects the freedom of others. That irreducible fact about the world we inhabit is what should drive hospitable gestures, not something contingent or variable like “benevolence” or showing “kindness” to strangers. So Kant appears to tie hospitality to the unconditional, meaning that hospitality springs from that which is universally applicable to everyone, everywhere, every time. And yet that same hospitality is in Kant’s hands severely restricted and conditional: the host can offer only momentary respite to the stranger (for example, the guest may not refuse a

shipwrecked sailor), but the guest cannot reasonably expect the residence, employment, etc.. In his Third Definitive Article (of *Perpetual Peace*) Kant is very explicit about these conditions and restrictions: *The other* [i.e., the host] *can turn him* [the stranger] *away, if this can be done without destroying him, but as long as he behaves peaceably where he is, he cannot be treated with hostility. What he can claim is not the right to be a guest...but the right to visit; this right, to present oneself to society, belongs to all human beings...* So Kant is, as it were, having his cake and eating it too: his hospitality partakes of the unconditional, or at least appeals to it as a kind of guarantee; for hospitality truly to be hospitality, for Kant, it must be universalizable, applicable to all, always. The reason a host offers hospitality to a guest and treats a stranger as a guest should be because it is the right thing to do, not because it is the right thing to do right now, because I “feel” like it today but perhaps not tomorrow, because my current government wants to appear benevolent and altruistic but a subsequent government might have quite different ideas about strangers and about building walls to keep them out.

But in practice Kant’s hospitality rooted in principles looks severe conditioned; you can visit but you cannot be a guest; you have a right to be treated without hostility but beyond that, Kant is very clear: you may be treated with kindness and graciousness and generosity, but all those things are a matter of *philanthropy*, i.e., tied to local circumstances, not *right*, not *rightfulness*, which is the same for everyone, always, everywhere. Hospitality is not nothing: to be accorded the right to be treated without violence is hardly nothing. But Kant is firm on hospitality being no more than this. Perhaps this is why, in his manuscript notes for *Perpetual Peace*, Kant characterizes hospitality as “*die bloße Hospitalität*” [“mere hospitality”], “mere” here meaning the refined and unchangeable minimal essence of hospitality, what it is when you have stripped away all the philanthropic associations that understandably stick to the term. Derrida’s point (explored in more detail in other texts of his) is that Kant’s “unconditional” is thus not truly unconditional at all, but instead expresses a *European’s* typical worry about guarding his possessions (including making sure that he or she is firmly in possession of being a host) and worry about being dispossessed, concern about losing something of himself or herself if strangers are given more than the most minimal of hospitality . . . even if Kant also characterizes that worried and qualified hospitality as rational, principled, and universal. A more truly unconditional hospitality, assuming such a thing could ever exist, would need to jettison its “European-ness;” it might not be rational at all, certainly not subject to the calculations and limitations that, for example, Kant is scrupulously careful to prescribe. So absolute hospitality, unconditioned hospitality, might not even have the condition that it be “rational” or “universal.” What would it mean, then, to be unconditionally hospitable to the idea of an unconditional hospitality? In Derrida’s terms, it is never a matter of choosing between conditional or unconditional hospitality. The two are intertwined and yet also entirely separate. Hospitality remains conditioned, no matter how it is practiced in the world; sometimes these conditions are oppressive, sometimes not oppressive or at least less oppressive. But for Derrida unconditional hospitality is therefore not nothing either. Why? Because any act of doing justice to the other, giving over to the other, is worth affirming. The very conditionality of hospitable acts, the fact that we can describe them as conditional, means that in some sense we are appealing to the unconditional form of hospitality against which

the conditional nature of conditional hospitality is to be determined. Every conditional hospitality presupposes an unconditional background against which the particular conditions of the conditional act are thrown into relief. If Kant's hospitality is quietly conditioned because it is rooted in European notions of rationality and universality, then it is legible and understandable *as* hospitality because set against the backdrop of an unimaginable absolute or unconditional hospitality—a hospitality that isn't rational or universalizable . . . but isn't irrational or particular (i.e., the opposite or rational and universalizable) either. These binary oppositions that organize so much of the intellectual history of the so-called "West" (rational vs irrational; universal vs particular) are just that . . . artifacts of a certain, identifiable tradition going back to Plato and forward to modern Europe, but so often, too often, passed off by those in power to describe reality, to be structured into the nature of things. They may not be at all, but even to consider this possibility is to compel several thousand years of thinking that is super important to European social and political thought to tremble. Derrida calls this trembling "deconstruction," i.e. not the *destruction* of Western thought but identifying insurgent currents and strange paradoxes that point to the limits of that thought, that bring out how it is constructed in such a way that tries its best to mask its inherent instabilities, fragilities, and contingencies: *de-construction*. Unless you are trained or perhaps brought up in wholly different or alternative traditions of thinking—forms of Indigenous wisdom, for example, or the practices of knowledge to be learned in India or Pakistan or Tibet, just to name a few—thinking against the "Western" traditions, which is to say, from Derrida's perspective, thinking more deeply *within* them, is a challenge. It involves unthinking what you have been schooled into thinking is thought.

Another way to think of absolute or unconditional hospitality is to borrow a move we saw last term in Plato. In the *Republic*, Socrates reminds his interlocutors that every time we discuss or practice *particular* kinds of justice, comparing and contrasting them (which is what happens in the dialogue), we can do so only because, without necessarily thinking of it, we are relying on the idea of a *general* justice, justice *as such*, of which individual kinds of justice are a particular expressions. Without having a general idea of justice in mind, we could talk about individual versions or expressions of it. The same with unconditional hospitality: I cannot discuss hospitality in classical antiquity or 20<sup>th</sup>-century Algeria (two examples of conditional hospitality explored at the start and finish of Derrida's seminars) without relying on a notion or *idea* of hospitality as such, sheer or pure hospitality, a hospitality without conditions. How would we be able to talk about different kinds or examples of hospitality, comparing and contrasting them, unless we had the general idea of hospitality in the back of our minds? --A bit like Plato's "forms." Remember that in Plato, individual expressions of, say, goodness in the world all presuppose an general idea of goodness, the "form" of goodness. We may never know the form of goodness, but that does not prevent us from considering different expressions or concepts or practices of goodness, or from comparing them and contrasting them. Pure or unconditional goodness is the background for our practice or consideration of particular goodness.

What would absolute hospitality *be* if it could be practised? That's an absurd question, if a

perfectly understandable one, since to practice hospitality necessarily means practising it some particular circumstance, which in turn means practising it under the specific conditions of that circumstance—ancient Greece, say, or modern Algeria. Still, it's hard not to think that a truly unconditional hospitality would mean ceding nothing less than everything to the arrival of the foreign other, a complete giving over to the other or to the foreigner in mind and body. Without an qualifying conditions, the other would effectively replace me. But isn't that what *my death* is? —A complete giving over and being given over to that about which we know nothing and can know nothing?

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I trudged Germany's highways in the autumn of 1945, headed for Berlin ahead of the Soviets coming to take over the rural Harz region where we lived as the war ended. We walked for weeks. My mother told me it was three months.

Food was unavailable. We gleaned fields. Drinking water was scarce. Men with guns stopped us. Barbed wire. Go back. Stay where you are. Go here. Go there. Wait. A U.S. sentry post deloused us with blasts of white powder. A cloud of dust exploded, and I howled.

We slept in bombed-out buildings. We slept on pine straw in forests. Thousands of us. All ages. In any sort of weather.

No one has ever wanted to come to America more than I. At the age of 17, unaccompanied, I succeeded. Sixty years of living here hasn't erased the white-hot need that drove me. That caravan dragging itself to our border should be given refuge, medical support, food, clean beds.

Undesirables can be sorted on site. Identifying bad actors was a job I had once as a U.S. Army military policeman/interpreter in Berlin in 1959-1960. Doesn't take rocket science. Create a sieve that won't let them scatter. Sort them out one at a time. Ellis Island made it work then. So can we now.

They are me, 73 years ago. Starvelings infested with lice. Let them in with a smile and with open arms. Wash their feet. Wash their faces.

Eric Dietrich-Berryman, Virginia Beach



We'll come back to this question, but it is important right away to say that hospitality to death is very important to the exploration of hospitality in Derrida's work. As is something closely related, namely the hospitality towards the dead and to the memory of the dead, a problem we've seen explored in Levi. That explains why he spends so much time and thought in the second seminar on Antigone's tears, i.e., on the sadness that comes from not knowing where the dead go once they are dead. In other books, especially a landmark study of loss entitled *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida points to a terrific paradox or twist that lies at the heart of the effort of being hospitable to the dead and to their memory. On the one hand, the only way to honour the dead is to remember them, i.e. refusing to let their memories dissolve and vanish. We remain faithful to the dead by remembering them. As Levinas argues (in texts that, alas, we don't take up), only murderers believe that death means nothingness, i.e., that after death nothing at all remains of the dead. That, after all, was the wish of the SS—that the dead have no witnesses, no one honour the lives and memories of the murdered. On the other hand, every time we open ourselves to the memory of the dead, letting them arrive on the borders of our memories, the dead are unavoidably "packaged," "simplified," and "idealized." After all, the memories of the dead are inevitably limited and enormously reduced versions of the living person who is now dead. A loving remembrance of someone will never be anything close to what that person was in life. And so being hospitable to the dead comes with certain inviolable *conditions*: you may enter my memory, but only by becoming something quite different from what you were in life. So in some sense, even the most loving remembrance of the dead, practised in the name of faithfulness to the

dead, is always also faithless. That's the sorrowful premise of the beautiful 2002 film *Solaris*, based on a 1961 novel by Stanislaw Lem and a 1972 film directed by Andrei Tarkovsky. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solaris\\_\(2002\\_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solaris_(2002_film)) But this is a version of a problem we've seen before on the course, namely in the work of Primo Levi, for whom it is fundamentally important to remember the dead, "the drowned," but not without facing the fact that no memory of them is adequate, no memory is completely faithful.

7) The question of being hospitable to death is mixed up with the question of being inhospitable to death, one expression of which would be to deem others to be ungrievable, i.e., unworthy not only of life but also of death, of a "properly" remembered death. Hospitality and death are strangely folded one into the other, which is the main reason why Derrida turns to that fold in his discussion of the tears of Antigone in the second seminar. Her tears spring not or not only from the death of her beloved father, Oedipus, but also from being prevented—by him, no less—from knowing where he is buried. Knowing where the dead are, and hospitably preparing a place for them to be honoured and remembered, is, like hospitality, a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon, or so it seems. Wherever there have been humans on the planet, they appear to have buried their dead, i.e., taken time to inter them, to give them a place of rest. To this day, few offences are more heinous than abandoning the dead or desecrating their burial sites. And yet, after Butler's work, isn't this "crime" also endemic, i.e., world-wide, do we not see the dead desecrated by being deemed to be ungrievable, which is, after all, a violence directed not only at the dead but also at the living, who are denied the possibility of publically grieving for their dead? What counts as a human voice?

The question of a hospitality towards the dead and towards death raises another point, and that is, in Derrida's hands, hospitality is not at all restricted to ceding one's place to another human being. Where in Derrida's seminars is that fact evident? Note that for him, hospitality means exposure to all sorts of strangers—the unaccustomed thought, the unlikely future, the perilous question, the unknown past, the unstable ground, the singular non-human life. Hospitality means being hospitable to "hospitality," i.e., to the sometimes forgotten or avoided strangeness of the concept itself. Derrida's work as a whole is characterized by an attentiveness to the alien qualities, the unexpected surprises, the odd arrivals that dwell inside concepts that we thought we knew—"France," "Europe," "Judaism," "democracy," "cosmopolitanism," "the animal," and many others. Dwelling with those sorts of strangers has been an important organizing element of this course, including the strangers "inside" concepts like: "the human," "grief," "poetry," "justice," "capital," "nationhood," and "power."

In *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795), Kant suggests that hospitality is an important part of the creation of a more peaceable future. He saw young men being conscripted into ever larger armies and ever larger wars. He saw communities indiscriminately savaged by combat that knew no bounds. But he had the courage—he was, after all, a philosopher employed by the state and directly answerable to the Prussian sovereign who ruled over what was then the most militarized nation in the world—to speak against armed belligerency and against the machinery of war that

had destroyed governments, economies, civilian populations and thinking itself. He said several times in his life that the fortunes sunk into costly wars would be so much better spent on educating the citizenry. He wrote his great anti-war pamphlet as a kind of letter addressed to citizens of the world, calling for hospitality and peace against the dominant forces of enmity, polarization, and cruelty. A great deal of political theory in both Kant's age and our own is founded upon the assumption that political life is about hurting those deemed to be "enemies" and helping those deemed to be "friends." In the *Republic*, we saw Socrates wrestling with a notion of justice founded on this very distinction; as Socrates says, winking at us when he does so, dogs (those creatures which are legendary for loyalty to their masters and being hostile to strangers) are therefore "the first philosophers." But for Derrida this kind of "dog-thinking" plays directly into the hands of an already militarized culture, transforming hosts into warrior nations, i.e., countries whose dominant narratives are activated by belligerence, aggression, and often manufactured worries about homeland security. The concept and practices of hospitality offer a different narrative with which to understand ourselves anew while also reconsidering the fate of those who have suffered because they have been declared to be an "enemy." Kant's and Derrida's notion of hospitality gives us a different way to think about belonging and co-existence, a sociality rooted in the importance of helping others, of offering others sustenance and shelter.

M. NourbeSe Philip, a Trinidadian-born Canadian essayist and poet activist and lawyer writes about what she calls "radical hospitality." This hospitality is perhaps not quite the same thing as Derrida's use of the same phrase, but it does evoke a welcoming gesture and a ceding to the needs of the other that is forceful because elemental. In her essay, "The Ga(s)p," Philip writes:

We all begin life in water  
 We all being life because someone once breathed for us  
 Until we breathe for ourselves  
 Someone breathes for us  
 Everyone has had someone—a woman—breathe for them  
 Until that first ga(s)p  
 For air.

Once upon a time everyone one of us, in the womb, had someone else, our mother, breathe for us. For Philip, that act is an act of radical hospitality, a giving over to the other, the unborn infant, that, she suggests, we carry with us through out lives: we have each been the recipient of the purest form of hospitality. We were a strange guest honoured by a welcoming host. Philip goes on to say:

Could we, perhaps, describe this process as an example and expression of radical hospitality? Radical because although the fetus is genetically comprised of both the mother's and the father's genes, physiologically the child is also a stranger. Ordinarily the mother's body should generate activated T-cells, which would then attack the fetus's foreign antigens. There is, however, a complex and

not-yet-entirely understood process by which the mother's body turns off the functions of her T-cells, which would normally result in the rejection of the fetus. It is a radical hospitality that entails housing the stranger, which includes breathing for the occupant until that child is able to breathe on its own. The process elaborates a complex act of acceptance of alterity.

Activating and irrigating Philip's remarks is bearing witness to the agony of Eric Garner, a young black man choked to death by police in 2014, whose last words were *I can't breathe*. "I can't breathe" subsequently became one of the slogans of the Black Lives Matter movement. We begin life having had our breathe given to us by another; we then go through life obligated to share our breath with others wherever possible. And yet Black men repeatedly die at the hands of authorities whose stated objective is "to serve and protect" but whose actions deny breath to minorities and to persons of colour, and to strangle those whom they deem to be dangerous others.

NourbSe Philip's position has affinities with an argument made by another leading Black activist, the American Critical Race Studies thinker, Fred Moten, who presses for a counter-intuitive condition of "homelessness." The "homelessness" he imagines is

not [necessarily or only] a condition where you don't have a house. Homelessness is the condition in which you share your house, you give your house away constantly as a practice of hospitality. Home is where you give home away.

Do you see how Moten is, in the shadow of the concept and practice of a radical hospitality, inviting us to think of "home" differently? Remember that he is the citizen of a nation that is devoted to "homeland security," a nation that invests enormous resources in building walls between itself, "the homeland," and the others it deems to be a threat. So giving up the idea of the home as a space "safe" from others, and embracing a home that undoes itself by embracing others, is attractive to him.

Hospitality is a very ancient cross-cultural concept and cluster of practices that speaks to the irrepressible obligation to develop a shared, porous, and welcoming world rather than the injurious, segregated, and warring one that we currently endure. In a highly militarized age, fuelled by xenophobic fears, the latter world can feel like the overwhelmingly inevitable one but I do not believe for one moment that that is the case. Indeed, it is impossible for me to imagine the university classroom, and thus teaching and learning in all its myriad forms, existing or surviving, if not in earnest of a more democratic and less unjust world. Otherwise, what would be the point of addressing students in the name of knowledge and being addressed in turn by them? Teaching and learning are fundamentally acts of generosity or hospitality; the classroom is, properly speaking, a scene of fragile openness to other ideas, questions, histories, cultures, politics, and futures. Without that openness and without the vulnerability that comes with that openness, teaching and learning would be only the mechanical communication of information, the very

anathema of what a university stands for. So hospitality – including the hospitality of teaching and learning – represents a direct point of resistance to militaristic values, including those that govern too many of the narratives that Canadians are today compelled to adopt to describe themselves. Hospitality is an old idea and not without its complexities and limitations, to be sure, including complexities and limitations in classroom settings, but it has striking contemporary relevance. Just look at the human catastrophe unfolding in Europe, North America and the Middle East at this very moment, and how different nations and transnational groups wrestle with the question of whether or how to provide shelter to the men, women, and children who are dying in the thousands fleeing some of the most inhospitable places on the planet. The present moment thrums with questions that could hardly be more pressing: What does it mean to practice hospitality towards others? What are the fatal consequences of turning our backs on those who in fact have an imprescriptible right to live and to thrive in this world, which is the only world we have? What are “the rights of hospitality”? What are the obligations owed to those who deserve and who desperately need a home in which to flourish?

You will have noticed that *Of Hospitality* is a book in two hands: Jacques Derrida, plus a text called “Invitation,” by Anne Dufourmantelle, that acts as a succinct and often lyrical response to Derrida’s remarks. Dufourmantelle characterizes her text as an “invitation,” but she is responding to the invitations to thought elicited by Derrida’s seminars. Who here is the host, then, and who is the guest? (Born in 1964, Dufourmantelle was a French philosopher, practising psychoanalyst, and a professor at The European Graduate School who initially studied medicine before deciding instead to do a Ph.D. in philosophy. In 2018 she drowned off the coast of St.-Tropez saving the lives of two children: a hospitable act if there ever was one.)

One last prefatory note, but one that is important. What activated Derrida’s reconsideration of hospitality for social and political thought was in part his disgust about a phenomenon that he observed taking place in Europe that continues today and that has in fact spread to other parts of the world, including the U.S.. In the 1990s, Derrida was appalled at a new twist in the criminal code in France, among other European nations, in which persons or organizations that welcomed individuals and families seeking asylum were subject to criminal prosecution for offering help. French political leaders called these “crimes of hospitality,” a phrase that troubled Derrida deeply:

I remember a bad day last year: It just about took my breath away, it sickened me when I heard the expression for the first time, barely understanding it, the expression crime of hospitality [*delit d’hospitalité*]. In fact, I am not sure that I heard it, because I wonder how anyone could ever have pronounced it [...] It concerned a law permitting the prosecution, and even the imprisonment, of those who take in and help foreigners whose status is held to be illegal. This “crime of hospitality” (I still wonder who dared to put these words together) is punishable by imprisonment. What becomes of a country, one must wonder, what becomes of a culture, what becomes of a language when it admits of a “crime of hospitality,”

when hospitality can become, in the eyes of the law and its representatives, a criminal offense? (From “Derelictions of the Right to Justice (But what are the ‘*sans papier*’ lacking?),” in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971–2001* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 133.

How could offering succour to the imperilled stranger, which is the very essence of hospitality, be characterized as a “crime”? For Derrida, as for many others, it is a “crime” that asylum seekers are so often treated as dangerous criminals or “bad hombres,” as Trump says. But to make those who help asylum seekers into criminals adds insult to injury. Isn’t the failure to do justice to the vulnerable stranger the opposite of a crime? How can doing justice be illegal?



Late in June 2019, the news media circulated sorrowful photographs of the drowned bodies of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his infant daughter. They were 25 years and 23 months old, respectively. As Bill Chappel of NPR reported, “the small family was fleeing poverty in El Salvador and had secured a humanitarian visa in Mexico — but after spending two months in a migrant camp waiting to apply for asylum in the U.S., Martínez decided that they should try to cross the border on Sunday.”

<https://www.npr.org/2019/06/26/736177694/a-father-and-daughter-drowned-at-the-border-put-attention-on-immigration>

Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez, Tania Vanessa Ávalos and their daughter, Valeria, on Valeria's first birthday. (María Estela Ávalos)

### **Seminar One: Foreigner Question**

Derrida begins the first seminar with what he calls *the question of the foreigner* (3) and marks the

urgency of that question today. By “the question of the foreigner,” Derrida observes, he evokes two things: 1) the question that the foreigner asks of me, i.e., the foreigner’s question and 2) the question I ask of the foreigner. But it is the first of those two questions that will take up much of Derrida’s remarks, i.e., the ferociously burdensome need to experience the stranger as the questioner and the border-crosser as an opportunity to unsettle all of our old assumptions about “us” and “them.” Remembering what Levinas had taught him, Derrida invites us to think of the experience of the coming of the stranger or the foreigner as a disruptive moment of surprise. And throughout his remarks, he also asks us to be hospitable to hospitality, meaning to be open to the strangeness of the concept of hospitality and to thinking of this very old idea in startlingly new ways. You and I are invited to be host to the strangeness, the stranger, named hospitality.

How does Derrida let hospitality become a kind of stranger? For him, hospitality is not only about the approach of the stranger. It is also itself very strange because it involves several contradictions.

1) Hospitality is always conditional. When you offer safety and sanctuary to a guest, you welcome that guest . . . but on terms that are governed by already existing codes, laws, languages, and conventions. The stranger has rights and is owed obligations but never without certain identifiable conditions. No hospitality happens without already existing “frames” (that would be the word that Judith Butler would use) that compel the stranger arriving on my door-step to be legible and comprehensible in particular ways.

2) And yet conditional hospitality is understood and offered against the far horizon of what Derrida calls *pure* or *hyperbolic* or *absolute* or *unconditional hospitality*, i.e., a welcome without any terms or conditions. To welcome the approach of the other on those terms would be to expose oneself to the sheer shocking surprise of the unknown and completely unexpected other. That kind of welcome doesn’t in fact exist, but, Derrida suggests, it remains the horizon against which we orient ourselves when we offer hospitality in all the conditional ways that we normally do. In other words, absolute hospitality is a kind of virtual horizon before which every particular act of hospitality plays itself out.

Derrida is struck by what he calls the *asymmetry* between conditional and absolute or unconditional hospitality. *Absolute hospitality requires that I open 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 for them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names* (25). But in the world, absolute hospitality remains unrealized, indeed impossible, because hospitality is always offered from an already existing context. Hospitality is a question of sifting between guests and *parasites, a guest who is wrong, illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion and arrest*. And in exercising my ability to make such normative discriminations, I shore up who I am. I make an “us” out of “us” by determining the “them” of “them.” So there is *no hospitality . . . without sovereignty of oneself over one’s home, without filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence* (55). *One’s home* is therefore a strange place, protected and exposed at the same time. *With every habitable house and home, Derrida points out, you also need an opening, a door and windows, you have to give up a passage to the outside world, to the stranger* (61).

Perhaps the only stranger who arrives without conditions is death, the ultimate unknowable other. As Derrida says, it is important to consider the question of the guest as something more than a human guest. *But we need to go further, and also think of responsibility toward death. There is no hospitality without memory. A memory that did not recall the dead person and mortality would be no memory. What kind of hospitality would not be read to offer itself to the dead one, to the revenant?* (144). As the most foreign of foreigners, Derrida suggests, death and the dead press hospitality to its very limits. It is those limits that activate the classical Greek playwright, Sophocles, the author of *Oedipus at Colonus*.

(Derrida often returns to ancient Greek drama in these seminars. Why? It is his way of reminding us that although current forms of social and political thought must struggle mightily to admit the thought of “hospitality,” in all its strangeness, into its considerations, calibrated as that thought is to the “friend/enemy” distinction, and to thinking in binaries like “friend” versus “enemy,” there is a long and important tradition of other thinkers whose work yields up a robust language with which to consider the oddness of the ways in which the guest is the host of the host and the host is the guest of the guest: namely, the literature of classical Greece. But of course, there is a long-standing resistance from within the discipline of philosophy, or a certain conventional notion of philosophy, to treat literature as a practice of knowledge. Derrida spent his entire career seeking to upset that policing of knowledge, and the subjugation of literary knowledge. That move proved scandalous to many philosophers and in fact still does, long after Derrida’s untimely death. Perhaps this is one reason why his work was welcomed into English departments in universities across the world (beginning in the 1980s, when translations of his work became more readily available) much more than in philosophy departments.)

Derrida recalls Plato’s dialogues, in which a character named *the Foreigner* or *the Stranger* (*xenos*, from which we get the word, “xenophobic”) figures. The Foreigner is an odd character because he is the one who asks what he calls *the unbearable question*, i.e., the question that is deeply unsettling, the question that challenges the most fundamental assumptions of Greek wisdom. Socrates ordinarily occupies that disruptive position in the dialogues, but in *The Sophist*, his voice momentarily recedes, ceding his authority to the compelling presence of this stranger, this foreigner. But as Derrida notes, the Foreigner proceeds with some caution: he asks to be welcomed into the charmed circle of these wealthy, literate Greek men in order to work and think with them. He frankly admits that he wants to ask some hard questions, and he implores his hosts not therefore to mistake him for a *parricide*, i.e., as someone who comes to murder or destroy the authority of his Greek hosts. What is the unbearable question that he poses? Is there room in your world, my new Greek friends, he asks, for something that isn’t easily described as either *being* or *not-being*, i.e. as existing or not-existing? Derrida will ask and answer this question elsewhere in his work, suggesting, for example, that “spectres,” the things that haunt us without being entirely present to us, are a vivid case in point of the strange thought that the stranger introduces. Here in the hospitality seminars, Derrida isn’t as interested in the question itself as he is in the sorts of things that are said about the question. The Stranger worries that he will be looked upon as *deranged* (9), putting his head where his feet should be. What fascinates Derrida is the curious

uncertainty of the Stranger's role in the dialogue. On the one hand, he fully anticipates that he will be subject to the administration of his Greek hosts, not least at the moment that they decree him to be mad. To say that what he says is madness is a way, after all, of safely quarantining his questioning presence, subjecting him to normative control that decides which ideas are rational and which ones are irrational. And yet the stranger has the temerity to say to the Greek authorities that what he says is available for all to see. The stranger is a strange combination of power and powerlessness, an indeterminacy that interests Derrida a great deal: the guest is always subject to the host's normative requirements, and yet the guest also possesses the capacity to unsettle the host's complacency. Part of this indeterminacy is built into the language itself. As Derrida remarks, *xenos* in ancient Greek could mean "stranger" but it could also mean "guest-friend." What's odd and revealing is that other words associated with hospitality and with guesting and hosting share analogous slipperiness. For example, *hostis* can mean "enemy" but also "guest." *Unheimlich*, the German word for "uncanny" or "strange" can sometimes mean "familiar" or "of the home and hearth."

Derrida then turns to another dialogue, *The Statesman*, where we see, yet again, the arrival of a Foreigner. Socrates warmly welcomes the Foreigner, who will in turn pose intriguing questions about *man as a political being*. The Foreigner asks: rulers or governors rule but does that mean that they have the *knowledge* to rule or to govern? Just because you rule, do you know anything about being a leader? Good questions! Derrida is interested in how questions lying at the heart of social and political life here come from elsewhere, i.e., from the stranger.

Derrida notes that Socrates himself was *sometimes the foreigner*. Before *his fellow citizens and the Athenian judges* (15), Socrates stages himself as if he were a foreigner, in particular foreign to the world and language of the courts. And he does so even though the stakes are very high, indeed, none higher, given his life is on the line. Socrates asks for a certain accommodation: he asks for a certain patience or understanding from the Athenians who are also judging him. He is in effect asking for *the right to asylum* in a language that is not his own, but instead a language that is *imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State* (15). As Derrida notes, hosts make a hospitable gesture towards a guest, but the hosts make that gesture in a language that is not the guest's language: the guest is required to *speak our language*. (But is "our" language really our language, i.e., something that I confidently possess? Or does language possess me? That's a question to which Derrida will return in these seminars.) As Derrida notes later on, when he speaks of language, he means more than a *linguistic operation*, more than language in a literal sense of the term. Instead, by language he evokes the universe of which speaking and writing a particular language—Greek or English, for example—is but a part, i.e., *the ensemble of culture, ...the values, the norms, the meanings that inhabit a language* (133). And as Derrida points out, sharing a language doesn't necessarily mean commonality. *In some respects at least*, he notes, *I have more in common with a Palestinian bourgeois intellectual whose language I don't speak than with some French person, who, for this or that reason...will be more foreign to me* (133).

Socrates presents *himself like a foreigner* for a couple of complexly overlapping reasons. First, it is a way for him to signal that he is being *accused in a language* [that]...*he doesn't speak*, i.e., that he is being tried by Athenians who have such different understandings of key questions like "What is truth?" and "What is impiety?" that he, Socrates, might as well be from a foreign land. Socrates says that he comes from the culture of *the market square next to the stalls*, and that he can only be an alien resident of the land and language and culture of the courts. He is here claiming to be the person who speaks a more straightforward language, not the convoluted language of the judicial system, the irony being, of course, that Socrates was famous for capturing his interlocutors in the convolutions of his own arguments. As the gadfly, as the master of ironic teaching, he was anything but straightforward and often counselled others against falling into the trap that truth is self-evident or uncomplicated. And the Athenians surely know this! Second, he characterizes himself as a foreigner precisely to trigger the obligations to strangers for which the Greeks prided themselves, as Greeks. Socrates asks the Athenians to *treat him like a foreigner for whom marks of respect can be demanded* (18). --An interesting, if risky, tactic, given the fact that his life is at stake, Derrida notes. But that only means that Socrates wants to put the question of hospitality and of the stranger front and centre in his dialogue. The Athenians felt super-Athenian, they revelled in their unique powers for being true Athenians, when they treated strangers as guests: it was important to how they understood or perceived themselves. So-called "barbarians" were incapable of treating strangers as guests, they said, whereas "we" Greeks, well, we demonstrate our exemplary powers by meeting the obligations owed to the ones who wash up on our shores or cross our borders. So Socrates is trading on that Greek sense of exemplary exclusiveness that paradoxically expresses itself at the moment that they behave inclusively. What sort of thing then is hospitality if inclusivity and exclusivity find themselves being expressed at the same time? Of course, Socrates is also being his typically playful or ironic self. His point is this: if I were actually a foreigner, you'd probably be treating me with more respect and understanding and tolerance than I am getting as a fellow Greek and Athenian! (21).

Derrida turns next to another ancient Greek text, this time not from classical philosophy but literature: Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus* (35), a play written late in the author's life, first staged when Plato was about your age. In this play, the troubled king arrives at Colonus, outside of Athens, now a blind, old man accompanied by his faithful daughters, Antigone and Ismene. He is in many ways a broken man, having unwittingly murdered his father and married his mother. Oedipus returns home, yet, as Derrida emphasizes, he addresses the inhabitants of that place as foreigners. He too is a foreigner in so many ways, estranged from the law and conventions of ancient Greek culture because of having violated some of its most sacred rules. No one wants a parricide hanging around, the very thing that the stranger worried about in Plato's dialogue. Oedipus enters the city asking who will offer him *a little hospitality* (35). But it is not at all obvious that he will be offered *shelter and hospitality* (37), given his offences. The Chorus, the band of elders who offer robust commentary on what takes place in the play while also being a character in the play, says he is *a wanderer, not a native*, to which Oedipus responds by pleading that although he is a kind of *phantom*, he shouldn't be mistaken for an *outlaw*, a criminal. But isn't he a criminal, at least in the eyes of the law? After all, he has committed both parricide and

incest (39).

Derrida next draws our attention to a second scene in the play in which the Chorus and Oedipus speak to each other, each calling each other *Stranger*. In the name of being hospitable, Oedipus asks the Chorus not to interrogate him too closely—to let him be. But the Chorus has heard terrible rumours about this old man, and Oedipus is compelled to admit that he had murdered his father and not only married his mother but also had two daughters by her, the ones who at that moment are standing by his side. Notwithstanding this interrogation, as the Chorus determines whether he, Oedipus, is fit to be allowed to cross the threshold and enter Colonus, the king of Colonus, Theseus, takes pity on the blind man. Theseus points out that he too *grew up as a foreigner*, and perhaps that puts him in a better position to welcome a stranger. As Derrida points out, across a single border (the border between Colonus and everything outside of Colonus), a kind of *alliance* is formed *between two foreigners*.

Derrida pauses and wonders about the nature of that public space in which two strangers greet each other. He wonders about what that space looks like today, inviting us for a moment to consider *a public space structured by the telephone, fax, email, and the internet, by all those other prosthetic apparatuses of television and telephonic blindness* (47). (What do you think Derrida means by *telephonic blindness*? He's recalling Oedipus's blindness, and is asking us to think of ourselves as present-day Oedipus's. But why is the *telephonic*, the technologies we use to extend ourselves globally through communication networks, a form of *blindness*? The suggestion here is that these networks vastly increase the reach of our understandings and perceptions and yet somehow also include an absence.) Our communicative technologies aren't simply a matter of "prostheses" or devices that mechanically extend our bodies and perceptions; they also shape or "structure" our experiences and understandings of social and political life. These apparatuses totally disrupt any notion of an enclosed or walled off home or homeland because they carry us out of ourselves into a networked world. But these same technologies, these same prostheses, these extensions of our thoughts and voices into the wide world, can also be used by sovereign authority to surveil and administer the home and the homeland. Every time you reach out to others via, say, Instagram or Facebook or Snapchat, as you know, you are also subjected to the scrutiny of data-miners and advertisers and social media corporations. The same technologies that transport you far and wide also facilitate the intervention of the state. Think of the leaked information provided by Edward Snowden, who, in 2013, shared documents with the media that showed the extent to which the National Security Agency was, in effect, spying on the American people using data collected directly from various telecommunication companies, and indeed sharing information with equivalent intelligence agencies in other countries. Or consider the more recent discovery that Cambridge Analytica, a voter-profiling company, harvested private information from more than 50 million Facebook profiles without users' permission to provide the Republican Party with data it then used to shape the 2017 Presidential campaign and to control its outcome. As Derrida points out, the "public space" is a curiously folded one, in which *the democratization of information* happens at the same time as an increase in *the scope of the police* (57). Democratic social and political life demands *visibility and daylight*, i.e.,

openness, disclosure, and sharing . . . but these same things are *also what the police and politics demand*, i.e., making us available and legible to sovereign power. Moreover, the same technologies and prostheses that enable us to share so much with each other can also be marshalled in the service of keeping secrets, encrypting and hiding information from others.

### **Seminar Two: *Step of Hospitality / No Hospitality [Pas d'hospitalité]***

On a chilly morning in Paris, 17 January 1996, Derrida opens his next seminar by pointing out that “we”—meaning he and his students, but also Europeans—find ourselves in the midst of *interminable, uncrossable thresholds*, moving *from one difficulty to another*. Hospitality calls for hospitality, for a certain openness to its inherent strangeness and complexity. But it is the policies and gestures that finalize boundaries and try anxiously to set them in stone that worry Derrida more. They are what he is pitching his seminars against. To do so, he asks us, conceptually speaking, means hanging on to the very difficult notion of *absolute hospitality*. He begins again in that strange place, evoking a hospitality that would amount to an encounter with the very strangest of strangers, an encounter that would, if it ever actually took place, render “us” strangers to ourselves. *Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any application, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visit, whether or not the new arrival is a citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female* (77). Such a strange, perhaps even inhospitably strange encounter to consider, the experience of exposure to something totally unclassified and unclassifiable, a refusal to identify the other in any way, even whether it was living or dead, human or animal, male or female. Such an encounter with the stranger would amount to a moment in which the host was dispossessed. In his work, Emmanuel Levinas asks us to shelter that moment of dispossession even and especially if it is instantly surpassed by all of our attempts to manage and administer and comprehend the arrival of the other, many of these attempts with the best of intentions and for perfectly understandable reasons. Derrida suggests here and elsewhere in the seminars that doing justice to the approaching other hews to the impossible ideal of absolute hospitality. But as we already know from this course, one cannot do justice to the other once and for all; it is always a process and an incomplete one at that. Levinas also taught Derrida that lesson: justice remains a task, a project, without end, since, as Levinas reminds us, there is no “happy end,” no salvational conclusion to history in which justice has been met once and for all. Derrida distinguishes between justice and the law and asks us to hold these two concepts in our heads at the same time. We try our best to do justice to the other, and in the process, that justice, which is the giving over of oneself to the other, is transformed into law, i.e., into the laws, rights, conditions and cultural frames that inform how we treat others who arrive on our doorstep. What’s important then is that we keep a close and careful eye on those laws, rights, conditions and cultural frames which determine ahead of time the terms under which the stranger approaches. Be wary, he suggests, of those situations in social and political life in which the approaching stranger is used as an excuse for the strong assertion of the “sanctity” or “purity” of the home, or when that stranger is exploited, used merely to shore up the boundaries that are imagined to exist between the home and the not-home, the

host and the guest. Yet in calling for the unsettling of the fantasy of fixing boundaries between host and guest (by building walls, for example), Derrida is not calling for their destruction either. Here we might recall Kant, who, in *Toward Perpetual Peace*, describes peaceableness not in terms of a single global government, which, as he says, would wipe out the various differences that make human beings what they are. Derrida is not imagining a world in which the guest dissolves into the host or the host into the guest; instead, he invites us to think of a world in which the boundaries dividing hosts and guests undergo radical multiplication and pluralization. No single line, no imaginary wall, divides a host from a guest because both the host and the guest are never one thing but always many things, always divided from themselves.

Derrida finds himself drawn back to the ancient Greek archive, which he treats throughout his seminars as offering up ways with which to think of hospitality in ever more disconcerting and problematical ways. In this, I suppose, he differs from Levinas, who sets the Greek world, the world of rationality, measured comparisons and judgments, apart from the world of *Jerusalem*, the term he uses to name the unfathomable experience of the encounter with the stranger and in particular the stranger's suffering. Derrida in effect sees in "Greece" (i.e., the Greek philosophy of Plato and the Greek literature of Sophocles) what Levinas sees more legibly in the figures of the bible. So Derrida returns to *Oedipus at Colonus*, but now the focus is less on the trials of the strange father, Oedipus, and more on the trials of the loving daughter, especially Antigone, who endures a bizarre estrangement from her father at the point of his death. In her, Derrida will see a strangeness that is important for his argument, a possibility that he hints at in the last lines of the initial seminar, in which he asks: *What is a foreigner? What would a foreign woman be?* (73). We could say that all foreigners are equally foreign . . . but that some foreigners are less equal than others.

Derrida notes a curious reversal at work in Sophocles's play. Usually the "foreignness" of the foreigner is associated with the place of their origin or birth. *The foreigner, the foreign citizen, the foreigner to the family or the nation, is defined on the basis of birth . . . [T]he foreigner is a foreigner by birth, is a born foreigner* (86). But something odd happens in Sophocles's play, where the focus shifts from the place of birth to the place of death, and, more generally, to the problems associated with *the experience of death and mourning* (87). Sophocles turns *the question of the foreigner* into a question of *what happens at death and when the traveller is laid to rest in a foreign land* (87). Derrida follows Sophocles down this unexpected path. (We might think here of how, when Derrida died in 2004, he was buried not in Algeria, the place of his birth and the country in which he lived until he was your age, but in France, a country in which he always felt himself to be a kind of stranger.) As Derrida notes, *those who are deported, expelled, rootless, nomads* often share two kinds of loss and two kinds of nostalgia. (Derrida called his complex relationship to Algeria, *nostalgeria*, mutating the French language, the language of the colonizers of Algeria, to describe the contortion of his "Frenchness" caused by his being French but not born or raised in France.) Two forms of nostalgia, then:

- 1) The travellers, the migrants, cannot not orient themselves in some way to the *places*

*where their buried dead have their last resting place.* Where you bury your dead is elementally tied to what one calls home or thinks of home or the homeland: it is the place *from which to measure all the journeys and distancing* (87). (We start to understand the uncommon emphasis given to returning human remains home or at least of making a burial place abroad into a small patch of “home.” In Toronto, I once lived near the “Highway of Heroes,” the roadway across which the bodies of Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan are transported on their long journey home. During the war, groups of Canadians regularly stood on the overpasses over the “Highway of Heroes,” many holding up Canadian flags, welcoming the return of the dead to the homeland and publically declaring the importance of burying the war dead to the homeland’s sense of itself *as the homeland.*)

--To be deprived of a resting place that one could call home: is that partly what makes the drowning death of the three year old Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, on 2 September 2015, unbearable? That he was not only deprived of a home but also that he died at sea, trapped without sanctuary between worlds and unembraced by a host? We all saw the terrible photographs of his lifeless little body washed up on the beach, so far from home, near Bodrum, Turkey. He and his family had been *en route* to Canada, we are told, where he would have joined relatives in B.C.. His family’s application to be accepted into Canada as a refugees had been rejected in June 2015 because it was deemed to be “incomplete.” The family had applied to be privately sponsored by Canadians, but was awaiting a declaration by Turkish officials that they were refugees, a declaration that is often difficult to obtain. Hospitality is always conditional.

Consider a brief essay recently published in the *London Review of Books* (39.6 / 16 March 2017 / page 32 ) by J. Jason Mitchell, a British man who has been working with German N.G.O’s helping to rescue migrants in the Mediterranean. In his moving essay, “Short Cuts,” he talks about the work of retrieving the bodies of drowned men, women and children, concluding his remarks with an open question about those whose graves remain unmarked or unseen. He calls for a hospitality to the dead in times that are grotesquely inhospitable to the living:

There are more than seventy cemeteries in Italy, Turkey and Greece where the unnamed refugee and migrant dead lie. In some, they are laid alongside generations of local families. Others are simpler – hastily dug graves, a modest marker. On the other side of the Mediterranean, the way through the Sahara Desert from Niger into Libya is dotted with shallow graves and abandoned bodies.

*But what happens to the dead at sea, the refugees and migrants who don’t make the twenty-mile sprint past the Libyan coastguard and fishermen preying on overcrowded, barely seaworthy boats and rafts?* Perhaps it matters that witnesses are present. Not just to retell the story of the survivors and the risks they faced but to recount the terms of the dead as a warning, to prevent them becoming an afterthought, like the pair of dead birds we found on our portside railing.

It strikes me that these two paragraphs capture a great deal of what is happening in Derrida’s

meditation on the death of Oedipus. How so? (For Mitchell's essay, see <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n06/j-jason-mitchell/short-cuts> )

Another contemporary circumstance to consider that asks us to think about the complex relationship between the “homeland” and the burial place of the dead, and between inhospitality to the living and inhospitality to the dead: in the wake of the terrible murders of six worshippers at a Quebec City mosque in January, 2017, a telling fact emerged. Although the Muslim community long been a part of the social and cultural makeup of Quebec City, Muslims have had no place to bury their dead. Indeed, the only Muslim-run cemetery in the province is in Montreal. Recent attempts to create a cemetery just outside Quebec City have been met with resistance. In an interview, Imam Hassan Guillet, who gave a eulogy at the funerals of three of the murder victims, emphasizes the connection between hospitality to the living and hospitality to the dead: “This [cemetery] would be the first gesture to show we are together. If the project is refused and we’re not allowed to be buried in this land, how are we going to be accepted to live in this land?” You might recall how Kant begins *Towards Perpetual Peace* inviting us to consider the close connection between the welcoming “home” and the burial of the dead. (See Ingrid Peritz, “Muslim acceptance still a delicate matter: Plan for dedicated cemetery near Quebec City underscores tensions as broad, if quiet, support is overshadowed by grumblings of fear,” *Globe & Mail*, Saturday, April 1, 2017, A3.)

2) *The exiles, the deported, the expelled* treat their mother tongue, their first language, as a kind of home or homeland, perhaps even as their *ultimate homeland, and even their last resting place* (89). The mother tongue (but I wonder why it is a “mother”?) is sometimes imagined and experienced as *the home that never leaves us* (89). The great German-American social and political theorist, Hannah Arendt, felt compelled to abandon Germany after the Second World War because, in effect, its catastrophic embrace of Nazism had meant that Germany had abandoned her. And yet, as Derrida notes, Arendt felt an inextinguishable bond with Germany through the language, through the mother-tongue, which never left her and which she never left. But what a very odd home or homeland the mother-tongue is! As Derrida points out, the mother-tongue is not something we are ever actually and punctually (i.e., all-at-once) in possession of. It would be much more accurate to say that language *expropriates* us because *What is called the ‘mother’ tongue is already ‘the other’s language* (89). We do not make our own language; instead, we are thrown into an already existing language, schooled into adopting its conventions, histories, and cultures, its ways of inflecting and shaping the world. We are the guest, as it were, of the language that hosts us at birth. In some elemental way, we are foreigners to that which feels most at home, our mother-tongue. Derrida spent a lot of energy making the French language strange to itself, often crafting new words out of old words, and often working to unfurl new meanings from already existing terms. (For example, the mass-less or weight-less “God-particle” whose haunting trace in the nature of things Derrida tracks throughout his work, he named *différance*, a word that does not exist in formal French. It is a term that declares its difference from *difference*, a word that does exist in French. You can read the difference between *difference* and *différance* but you cannot hear it when the word is pronounced orally.)

Let's consider another specific example that helps bring out the complexities of hospitality and inhospitality when it comes to the question of the mother-tongue. As you know, Dr. Jordan Peterson's visit to McMaster several years ago prompted a huge protest from students, who effectively prevented him from speaking on campus, an event that in turn prompted the then President of the university to commission a series of recommendations about free expression and the right to protest at McMaster. Those recommendations are currently available for public review and comment, including review by students. What prompted the spirited response to Dr. Peterson was his very controversial public decision to refuse to address his trans- and genderqueer students using the pronouns that they used to describe themselves. For example, some students identify as "they," not "he or she." Other students are born biologically female but identify as "he." Others live their lives in ways that do not come close to whatever "he" or "she" is conventionally meant to mean and so do not wish to be called by those names and in fact are wounded by them. Dr. Peterson dismissed his students' request for recognition, claiming that to use those pronouns amounted to an infringement on his "free speech." So his students were trying to help Dr. Peterson see that he is, properly speaking, a "host" who, acknowledging a right of hospitality, should, in the name of peaceableness and affirming the singularity of others, make a minor accommodation to his students, treating them as honoured "guests." Being the one in authority (a senior tenured white university professor is, after all, a position of extraordinary safety and privilege), he is the one to cede a minor place to others. But he would not, suggesting instead that to do so would mean he would be giving up something that was too important for him to give up, namely his intimate relationship with the English language. Dr. Peterson may have forgotten that professors everyday make accommodations to students that affirm that their lives and experiences are fundamentally different and that a robust teaching and learning environment must allow itself to be shaped and inflected by those differences. Differently abled students, for example, call for modifications of conventional teaching strategies. I am not suggesting that trans- or genderqueer students are disabled, far from it; my only point is that the classroom must be a space that encourages *difference*, not seek to police it or worse, to deny it. Think of the extraordinary power imbalance at work here in Dr. Peterson's classes: students who identify as part of a sexual and gender minority, students who are disproportionately the subject of a wide range of forms of discrimination, misunderstanding, non-recognition, and exclusion, are asking a tenured senior professor to slightly modify his everyday language use so that it better acknowledges the lived realities of those students. They ask for what Kant calls "the rights of hospitality." But Dr. Peterson accords those students none of those rights. In refusing to do so, he is working from an untested premise, namely that English, his mother tongue, is *his*, and that to modify it slightly can mean nothing less than giving up a part of *him*. But as Derrida points out in his seminars, the mother-tongue is never really *ours*; we have a language, but it isn't in our possession. So you have to wonder what Dr. Peterson is actually being asked to give up when English—including the conventions governing its gendered pronouns—is not his to give up in the first place. He feels jealously in possession of a language that more accurately has possession of him. His minority students are taking possession of "English," it is true, but they do so as a point of resistance to the conventional uses of a language that are part of the oppression that they are

enduring. Taking possession of English by modifying its use of pronouns does not take place in a social and political vacuum or free from a place of institutional privilege. Arguing in fact from a place of quite extraordinary privilege, but claiming that language should effectively be “apolitical,” Dr. Peterson insists that he cannot and will not meet his students’ plea for recognition, their request, as “guests,” that they be admitted into the mother-tongue and acknowledged by those “hosts” who are in authority. In the aftermath of the protests surrounding Dr. Peterson’s visit, the university is left with its own question of hospitality: do the rights of hospitality apply equally to everyone? Is a university obliged to allow any speaker on campus, including those who speak in ways that are transphobic, i.e., that encourage or endorse or practice forms of discrimination based on gender and sexual identity? Does hospitality include hospitality towards the inhospitable?

(For more on the questions swirling around Dr. Peterson’s visit to campus in 2017 and the university’s ongoing attempt to respond to it, you might be interested in the 4<sup>th</sup> year thesis project by a former student in the Arts & Science program, Tianqi Lei, “Considerations on Freedom & the Role of the Academy: McMaster University’s challenge in responding to Dr. Jordan Peterson.” Tian pursued further research on the topic in the summer of 2018 funded by an Undergraduate Student Research Award.)

Now, to return to the hospitality seminars, Derrida returns to *Oedipus at Colonus*, focussing now on what happens at the end of the play. As Oedipus is dying, he pleads with his host, King Theseus, that he *never . . . reveal to anyone, particularly his daughters [Antigone and Ismene] the whereabouts of his tomb* (93). --Such a strange and disconcerting request to make of the one who has offered you shelter. In denying Antigone the knowledge of where her father is buried, she is rendered into a kind of stranger to her own kin. It is wrenching enough, after all, to *die abroad and not always at all as you would have wanted it* (93). But Sophocles ratchets things up considerably by having the dutiful daughter, Antigone, *deprived of her father’s tomb . . . of the knowledge as to the father’s last resting place*. As Derrida notes, *It is as if Oedipus wanted to depart without leaving so much as an address for the mourning women who loved him*. Without an identifiable burial place, Antigone in particular is robbed of the work of mourning. So when her eyes fill with tears, she in effect mourns not only the loss of her father but also the loss of mourning. But, Derrida asks, incredulously, *How can one go through the mourning of mourning*, i.e., the loss of being “properly” lost? Oedipus is a stranger who dies in a strange land. But his secret burial makes him *an even more foreign foreigner* to his surviving daughters. Antigone begs her dead and now lost father, the one who, now dead, cannot see her, to see her, to see her weeping for the fact that she cannot see him, see where he is buried. *The tears say that the eyes are not made primarily for seeing but for crying*, Derrida notes (115). Meaning: what can be known, what can be brought to sight, must cede to something more elementally significant, namely the suffering of others. Sophocles is teaching a very difficult lesson here, but Derrida is listening closely, hospitable to Sophocles’s difficulty. Oedipus is invisible to his daughter but of course she is invisible to him too. I cannot see you, I have been forbidden by your death to see

you, Antigone in effect says; but there is something in me, the daughter who mourns you, that you cannot see either, something in me and of me that cannot be measured or calculated or seen, and whose very timing remains mysterious and thus a kind of secret, namely my mourning, my tears (117). Derrida explores these strange questions because the suffering of the other and the death of the other brings us to the very limits of the concept and the practice of hospitality. To respect and honour the other means not only offering a place for the other. It also means letting your absolute otherness, your absolute uniqueness and singularity, be as unlocalizable and unseen as the corpse of Oedipus is to his daughter. Here we encounter an insight similar to the one that the great Irish author, James, Joyce explores in his marvellous short story, “The Dead.” Towards the end of this story, the central character, Gabriel must face a sobering fact about his beloved wife, Gretta: namely, as close as they are, having had a long and happy marriage, an important part of her has always and will always remain unknown and unknowable to him. He suddenly experiences the arrival of her utter uniqueness in the midst of her utter familiarity. And so in some strange and disconcerting way, he grasps that a part of her will always remain “dead” to him . . . and, paradoxically, that is what makes her most singularly and indeed incandescently alive. To be hospitable to Gretta, he must learn to tarry with that which is inhospitable to him, that part of her that, thankfully, forever exceeds his grasp of her.

In the last pages of the seminar, Derrida turns to *the fairly recent history of Algeria*, the country of his birth, but not where he would die, nor where he would be buried. Derrida notes how the borders dividing citizens from non-citizens in Algeria shifted radically over time (143). For example, from the beginning the France’s colonization of the country until the end of the Second World War, Algerian Muslims were deemed to be *French nationals but not French citizens*. They were not *absolute foreigners* in the country of their birth, but they did not enjoy the rights of citizens either. As he notes, Algerian Muslims were finally granted citizenship after the First World War, as a way of honouring the families of those who had fought and died in the war. But they could only gain citizenship by renouncing their religious beliefs. Jewish Algerian were granted citizenship in France in 1870, but their citizenship was *abolished*, as Derrida says, when the Germany invaded France in 1940 . . . even though Germany didn’t specifically ask for or demand this change. Derrida was personally caught up in these changes in who was to be welcomed and not welcomed into “France.” Because he was Jewish, he was denied his status as a citizen and expelled from school, only to repatriated after the war. As he says in an interview with the Algerian intellectual, Mustapha Chérif, he is *An Algerian who became French at a given moment, lost his French citizenship, then recovered it (Islam and the West 30)*. [I would love to see a student in this course write an essay on Derrida’s dialogue with Mustapha Chérif about Islam.]

Near the end of his remarks, Derrida turns to another ancient archive, but this time it isn’t Greek philosophy or literature but a scenes from the bible, beginning with the story of *Lot and his daughters* from the Book of Genesis. It is telling that Derrida concludes his book on hospitality with a scene that not only mixes hospitality with extreme violence but that also reminds us that, in patriarchal cultures and settings, the terms governing a host’s hospitality will vary hugely

according to gender. (We can consider here some more recent examples. For instance, consider the fact that in 1907 the U.S. Congress passed the Expatriation Act, which decreed that American women who married non-citizens were to be stripped of their citizenship. The same law did not apply to American men who married non-American women.) What happens, Derrida asks, when *the law of hospitality* takes precedence over morality, over obligations to others? What sorts of violence can be perpetrated in the name of hospitality? In a patriarchal culture, Derrida notes, too often it is the father, *the familial despot*, . . . *the master of the house who lays down the laws of hospitality* at the expense of women. The story of Lot is a vivid and terrifying case in point. Lot is himself a stranger, a foreigner, to the ancient city-state of Sodom. He plays the role of a host to certain revered guests who are in fact angels who look like human beings and whom he presses to enjoy his home rather than remain out in the streets of the often unwelcome city. The Sodomites get wind of these protected guests and demand to see them in person, threatening to assault them, indeed, *penetrate* them, as some translations have it. Lot intervenes, but to protect his honoured guests from this violence he commits an act of violence: he offers to give over his daughters to the angry mob. Yet again, a welcoming act is braided closely with hostility. Here the guest supplants members of Lot's own household, estranging that home from itself in the name of offering a home to others. The fact that it is women in particular who are offered up in a kind of "exchange" is of course deeply concerning, as if Lot's daughters lived lives deemed by their father to be unworthy of living, which the Old Testament story describes in terms of the daughters dwelling in a home that offers no sanctuary. Lot's "bribe" infuriates the city-dwellers, but before anything happens, God's angels intervene. Lot, his wife and his daughters are commanded to leave Sodom, narrowly escaping its destruction, beginning another life that constitutes its own strange and violent story. Lot's life recalls for Derrida another biblical example of twisted hospitality, this one from the Book of Judges. That text recounts the story of a Levite who is offered sanctuary and hospitality in a home of man who lived in the city of the Benjaminites. While the men share a meal, the house is surrounded by other men who threaten to assault the Levite. The host protects his guest by offering both his own daughter and the Levite's unnamed concubine or "second wife" over to the men. The concubine is sexually assaulted and abandoned on the doorstep of the host's home. The Levite returns home, where he cuts the concubine into twelve pieces. That violence triggers more violence, as the Levites wage war on the Benjaminites. A horrific story, violence begetting more violence. Always a teacher teaching, Derrida concludes his seminars with a difficult question: *Are we heirs to this tradition of hospitality?* (155). What does it mean specifically to be inhospitable towards women and to be inhospitable in the name of hospitality?