

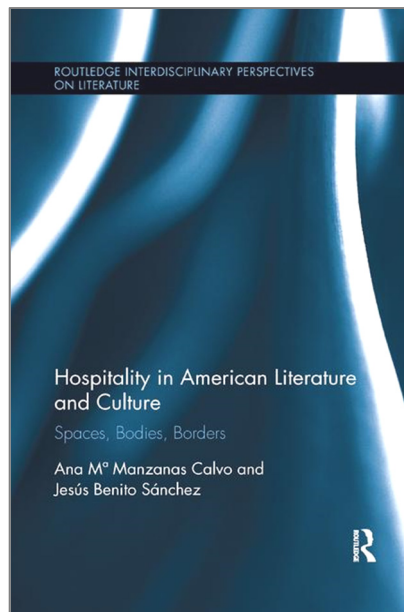
## BOOKS

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**Ana Maria Manzanas Calvo and Jesús Benito Sánchez (eds.),  
*Hospitality in American Literature and Culture: Spaces, Bodies, Borders*,  
Routledge, 2017, 214 p.**

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Despite the bewildering diversity of labels that have been attached to the first two decades of the new millennium, a critical examination of the contemporary socio-economic and political realities confirms that *globalisation* is one of the major forces that govern our lives and shape the face of the predictable future. Its effects are visible in all spheres of human activity, from the interconnectedness of regional markets or the unsettling growth of consumerism to the unprecedented mobility and exchange of people and information. Yet, as recent realities have shown, globalisation is far from a utopian destination: the election of populist governments, economic protectionism, escalation of the tensions between East and West are just a few visible signs indicative of a backlash against the globalist ideal, emergent in the wake of growing concerns that it may lead, if left unchecked, to the loss of identity and even freedom. Paradoxically, globalisation carries within itself the seeds of its own potential destruction.



It is precisely one of the ostensible effects of globalisation, the stronger interdependence between migration, identity and citizenship, that serves as motivation for Ana M<sup>a</sup> Manzanas Calvo and Jesús Benito Sánchez's compelling study of hospitality in American literature and culture. The relevance of the chosen subject is supported by statistical data. Thus, the centralised information available through the Migration Data Portal ([migrationdataportal.org](http://migrationdataportal.org)) indicates not only a significant increase in the total number of international migrants (from 153 million in 1990 to 280.6 million in 2020) but also the constancy of the United States as the country with the largest migrant stock. Against such a background (as well as the longer, though less precisely quantified American historical tradition and cultural trope of the haven or "hospitable" space), the authors set out on an ambitious journey, whose main objective is to examine a number of manifestations of the dialectic between hosts and guests in the United

States. This thoroughly documented critical and interpretive exercise, while most closely grounded in the field of immigrant studies, attests to a more comprehensive, interdisciplinary perspective, artfully blending the methods and objectives of border studies, gender studies and post-colonialism, as well as the discourses of literary criticism, cultural studies and philosophy.

The main objective of the study, we are informed in the Introduction, is to explore the meanings, conditions and the “new players” of hospitality in our times (5). It is a fundamental question, with both ethical and legal implications, since the history of hospitality has demonstrated the metamorphic nature of the concept. From the biblical example of the Good Samaritan to the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty, or the case of modern-day asylum seekers and migrant workers, hospitality is illustrative of a dialectic of related, yet sometimes disjunctive terms. We are reminded at this point of Derrida’s notion of “hostipitality” (which will resurface at other points of this research), a form of “aporetic hospitality that deconstructs itself” and reconceptualises antinomical elements such as “guest” and “ghost”, “incorporation” and “expulsion”, “inside” and “outside” (3). The introductory segment serves, therefore, both as a basic theoretical anchor for the in-depth discussion and analysis that will unfold over the following chapters and as a brief excursion into the origin and possible meanings of the term. As the authors admit, their interest is not so much in “felicitous or welcoming spaces” but in the “hostile spaces that accommodate the Other” (7). This choice rests on the acknowledgement of an essential disparity between the original and the present-day valences of hospitality. From a sacred duty and civic obligation or an unflinching reverential attitude

towards guests in the ancient world (as in *The Odyssey* or the Bible), nowadays hospitality is mostly a “mark of weakness in the face of the need to secure a stable national narrative, which most often correlates with border security” (6).

Indeed, along the seven chapters of the book, the authors offer a close examination of the ambivalent and paradoxical nature of modern hospitality in light of such key-notions as “borders”, “otherness”, “belonging”, “rejection” or “incorporation”. The first chapter, aptly titled “Re-Placing Hospitality: (In)hospitable Sites in American Literature” is somewhat peculiar, in that it does not focus on a specific text (or on a limited selection of thematically related works). Rather, it elaborates on the genealogy of hospitality, extending the scope of the investigation beyond the space of American culture and literature (despite the narrower suggestions of the title). The demonstration draws on a variety of sources and authors (The Old Testament, John Winthrop, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Immanuel Kant) and is indebted mainly to Derrida’s argument about the centrality of the threshold in any hospitable encounter, which places host and guest at an equal distance from the house, or the space of private possession (23). This liminality of the hospitable encounter as a threshold experience and the subsequent “displacement” of the involved parties is fundamental for understanding how hospitality shifted from a sacred gesture of welcoming and the acceptance of the otherness of the guest to a politicised notion occasioned by the birth of nation states, whereby the guest is seen as a potential threat to the host, consequent on which laws are imposed for the protection of the latter’s interests. In the course of history we are

witness to a “relocation of hospitality to the site of the nation” or a form of “conditional hospitality” that is “contingent upon the presentation of legal documents, and the analysis of the returns of the hospitable act”, as suggested in Kant’s idea of “Perpetual Peace”, a proposal that contributed to the establishment of a legal framework for international hospitality (39-43). In fact, one of the major problems of our world, the authors suggest, is precisely the inability to extend unconditional hospitality of the biblical sort to the modern-day “wanderers” (refugees, diasporans, migrants, etc.) (55).

Most of the remaining chapters of the book are devoted to examining the condition and treatment of various categories of displaced people within the perimeters of a series of “acquired” and “regulated” communal spaces. Chapter 2 looks at two contemporary “non-places”, the terminal and the hotel, in which the wandering subjects are “positioned simultaneously under the law and abandoned by it” (68), as in E. E. Hale’s parable “The Man without a Country” (1863), which serves as a preamble to the investigative act. The main figures examined in this chapter are the stateless person and the undocumented migrant, as illustrated in Steven Spielberg’s *The Terminal* (2004) and Stephen Frear’s *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002). Both films showcase stateless characters, who have been displaced from their original countries and turned into non-citizens – “superfluous bodies” akin to “ghostly exceptions” (66). Both the terminal and the hotel are situated outside the borders of the nation state, the former as a threshold space and the latter as an entity that parallels the structure and logic of the nation (70). At the same time, they are also complementary, characterised by heightened visibility, respectively, invisibility (72).

Chapter 3, “Cannibalistic Hospitality. Alex Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer*” develops upon an idea announced in the previous chapter, the incorporation of migrants into the host country. The authors’ interest is in the etymological meaning of the word and its subsequent implications – the “consumption” or total absorption of the migrants into the production machine of the host country, as an example of “cannibal or parasitic hospitality” (83), echoing Baudrillard’s claim that cannibalism may be regarded as a “radical form of hospitality” (*The Transparency of Evil* 144, qtd. 83). In Rivera’s mockumentary “Why Cybraceros” (1997) and his film *Sleep Dealer* (2008) immigrant workers are treated as “abject guests” (93), since the capitalist production machine fully absorbs the workforce (or rather, its potential energy) within a cyberspace that simultaneously incorporates and rejects that which is alien to the system. As the authors point out, Rivera “deconstructs the image of mobility as utopia” (103), for the apparent freedom of the virtual reality is, in effect, a means to deny the migrants physical access to the host country. In other words, “cannibalistic hospitality” separates “work from worker, space of spaces from space of flows, the power elite from cyber workers” (104).

The fourth chapter, “‘We the People of the International Hotel’ and the Hotel State. Karen T. Yamashita’s *I Hotel*”, returns to the trope of the hotel, investigated now as a possible “desti-Nation”, the polar opposite of the sovereign nation state that defines itself through territoriality (115). Yamashita’s hotel is populated by characters existing in a continuous liminal state, being placed at a “perpetual threshold”. It does, however, possess a latent potential, as a heterotopic entity that can ensure a communal space for former exiles. Within the well-delimited boundaries of the hotel,

new identities inevitably emerge. Like other related enclosing spaces, such as the internment camp or the prison-island, the hotel grants its occupants an “experimental membership” (115) and “the right to have rights” (127-128). The “hotel-state” envisaged in Yamashita’s novel proves that inclusion is ultimately possible within exclusion and that a home can be found in a non-home (107).

Chapter 5, “Between Hospitality and Hostility. Junot Díaz’s ‘Invierno’”, discusses the fragile nature of hospitality, as exemplified in this narrative of a guest turned oppressor, focusing at the same time on the question of linguistic identity and the control exerted through manipulation of the host language. In Díaz’s story, the head of the family emerges as a tyrant who keeps his wife and son in a state of subservience by denying them the benefits of speaking English. Formerly an unwanted guest, Ramón becomes a despotic host, an embodiment of the violence inherent in hospitality (130). For the members of his family, the apartment, a “microcosm of the United States” (130), turns into a miniature internment camp. The authors convincingly demonstrate in this context that Díaz’s story also illustrates the fundamentally male character of the acquired cultural capital, employed in this case by the pater familias for keeping the mother in a state of perpetual bondage. “Invierno” is thus an example of the interrelatedness of space, language and hospitality, also corroborated by the symbolic connotations of the landfill, the squalid extension of the “diseased and infectious” neighbourhood, in its own turn, a “spatial stereotypic for unwanted guests” (143).

The sixth chapter of the book, “Between Hosts and Guests. Ernesto Quiñonez’s *Chango’s Fire*”, deals with another in-between space, that of the Barrio, examining

in further detail the relationship between hosts and guests from the perspective of cultural hegemony, symbolic ownership of the neighbourhood and displacement. *Chango’s Fire*, we are told, is an eloquent “example of Barriocentricity, an aesthetic and political choice that reconceptualizes the narrative of place and its spatial practitioners” (148). The Barrio is a site of “evictions, allocations and relocations” (148) which evolves in the course of time from a slum to a genuine neighbourhood (149). There is a certain theatricality associated with the Barrio, as ethnicity turns into a spectacle with the arrival of new potential inhabitants, whose whiteness “violates the previous coloniality” of the place (153). In the wake of gentrification, the Puerto Ricans are transformed into reluctant hosts, once the “global city” starts to encroach upon their turf. Yet, as in “Invierno”, language is an empowering force and the sign of an emergent identity: in the end, Spanglish, “the language of the new race” (162), makes it easier for the inhabitants of the Barrio to “repossess space” (161).

With the last chapter, “Guest/Ghost Object in the Garden. George Saunders’s ‘The Semplica Girl Diaries’”, the authors’ attention shifts from the *machina oeconomica*, whose logic, we may argue, has informed the previous manifestations of the guest-host dialectic, to the *socialis machina*, an equally important factor in understanding the implications of hospitality. With Saunders’s story, we return to the common etymology of “guest” and “ghost”, already invoked at the outset of this investigative exercise. The “exteriority” of the guest, seen as a stranger that might threaten the harmony and security of the host’s domain, points toward the “ghostly” or “spectral” side of the guest. In the post-industrial world of the story, the Semplica Girls represent the final stage of what Marx has

decried as “insatiable and vampiric capitalism” (167). These migrant workers are the supreme example of the reification of the individual by market economy and consumerism. Unlike the cyber-workers in Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer*, whose vital energy is perpetual fuel for the production system they serve, the immigrant women in this story are wholly devoid of economic utility, being used, instead, as mere garden ornaments in a grotesque display of their hosts’ rank and status. In the American context, their state of suspended animation, the authors explain, exemplifies a “sanitized form of slavery” (172). In this scheme, the house of the host family is a sort of “neo-plantation”, where the guests are immobilised in a prolonged liminal condition, transformed into “givers” or the ultimate “gifts”. However, their eventual escape is also indicative of the poisonous potential of the gift, as their act leads to the financial ruin of the host family.

Profound and intriguing in its insights, reliant on carefully chosen and edifying examples and consistently convincing in its argumentation, Ana M<sup>a</sup> Manzanar Calvo and Jesús Benito Sánchez’s study of hospitality is an indispensable resource for those who wish to understand not only the centrality of hospitality in American culture and literature but, more importantly, the complex nature of human interaction in an age in which borders are simultaneously questioned and reaffirmed, with profound implications for the whole realm of individual and communal experience.

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