"WITH ARMS WIDE OPEN"

OF HOSPITALITY AND THE MOST INTIMATE STRANGER

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> The arrangement of furniture in space provides pathways for habits—the reading lamp placed just here, the television just here, the particular spices on the rack placed just so in relation to this person's taste and cooking habits.
>
> Iris Marion Young[1]

I was making spaghetti sauce one evening a few years ago and found myself adding curry powder to the pan. Not because I was trying some unusual flavor combination, but because a stranger I had joyfully welcomed into my home over a dozen years before had taken it upon herself to reconfigure the spice rack to suit her needs rather than mine. Thirty years after leaving my parents' home, I was once again sharing a kitchen with another woman.

Derrida describes the scene of hospitality as "a family scene,"[2] but in investigating the dynamics of the domestic scene of welcome, transformation, and appropriation suggested by my story, I will be inhospitable, if not hostile, to his intent in *Of Hospitality* by reprivatizing an investigation he wishes to render both public and political, "*more than* political" (OH, 139, emphasis in original), because of its deconstructive power. I reject the public space Derrida creates for his own discourse partly in response to his claim that "It's the family despot, the father, the husband, and the boss, the master of the house who lays down the laws of hospitality" (OH, 149, translation slightly modified), that is, in response to an all too familiar public domestic space in which families consist of powerful husbands and fathers, parricidal sons, grieving daughters,[3] and murdered wives/concubines, but mothers are glimpsed only in the margin. Partly, however, my inhospitality is also in response to the way in which Derrida closes his own text to any redemptive feminist discourse on hospitality by concluding with descriptions of the sexual abuse and mutilation of women that serve, he suggests, as the mark of the tradition of hospitality to which "we" might be heirs.[4] The mother, then, and the possibility of a maternal heritage in the discourse of hospitality and hostility that Derrida outlines.

Derrida, of course, is aware of this other heritage. He discusses the mother and the mother tongue, as well as their impossibility and their absence, briefly in *Of Hospitality,* and in much greater depth in the text that serves as a bookend for it, *Monolingualism of the Other.* In this second text, Derrida is concerned with those aspects of the social self one comes to by birth, and he indirectly refers to *Of Hospitality* as its "more problematic and troubled"[5] complement, if not its supplement:

> (One day it will be necessary to devote another colloquium to language, nationality, and cultural belonging, *by death* this time around, by sepulture, and to begin with the secret of Oedipus at Colonus. . . a secret he guards, or confides to the guardianship of Theseus. . .a secret that, nevertheless, he refuses to his daughters, while depriving them of even their tears, and a just 'work of mourning.') (MO, 13, emphasis in original)

But although *Monolingualism of the Other* is obsessed with the mother (and her tongue), there is little concern with the situation of the mother herself. Derrida elides, for instance, the not insignificant difference be-

tween his mother's relationship to French as both her language and the language of the alien "metropole" and the illiteracy of Abdelkebir Khatibi's mother and aunt both in their own language and in French. Instead, Derrida immediately moves on to discuss the different relationships their sons developed to French, one having a "mother tongue" and the other (Derrida) not (MO 36). What then is the hospitality of the mother and the mother tongue?

To welcome the known other into one's body (in an act of metonymical intercourse) is a quite different experience from that of harboring an unknown, but continually growing, alien at the core of one's being. In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida offers an unintended list of the fears that can accompany this process:

> Let us say *yes to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*, . . . whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female. (OH 77, emphasis in original)

This frighteningly unknown stranger comes into your life gradually, but eventually disrupts not only your home and your habits, but also your sleep, your digestion, your emotions, your sexuality, your body size and shape. "How can we distinguish between a guest and a parasite?" Derrida asks (OH, 59). Increasingly you feel yourself a place in which something-not-yet-a-someone lives, a foreigner who complains with constant shifting and kicking about the limited size of the accommodations. Then, at a time not of your choosing, this unknown other leaves your body through what is always an act/event/work of extraordinary and prolonged violence, as joyful as the "arrival" of this already present other might be.

The small stranger is now labeled male or female, given a nationality, entered into your dialect, idiolect, lineage, by virtue of the name which you, although not only you, have chosen for it. "A proper name is never purely individual," Derrida reminds us (OH, 23). This alien creature then gradually becomes naturalized, human, and learns your language which, as Derrida points out both here and in *Monolingualism of the Other* is not yours: "What is called 'the mother tongue' is already the other's language'" (OH 89). This is, of course, as true for the mother as for the child, perhaps more true of the mother insofar as language itself always returns to the Father.[7] But at the same time, it has traditionally been the mother who enforces the transition from the silent but eloquent communication between herself and the child—a communication of touch, of looks, of sounds-not-yet-words—to the rules of a grammar and of speech that exist outside what might be called their shared "auto-affection" of the unspoken word. "That is where the question of hospitality begins: must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all senses of the term" (OH 15). "Our language," note, not mine, not yours.

This stranger comes to share your home according to the laws of hospitality that you, although not you alone, establish for it. "Paradoxical and corrupting law: it depends on this constant collusion between traditional hospitality, hospitality in the ordinary sense, and power" (OH 55). In the process you discover in yourself capacities you never knew you had. Capacities for love and nurture, but also the potential capacity to kill if the alien you harbor were threatened; the capacity to lie, freely and often, as needed; the capacity to shift everything you believe about yourself and your world to accommodate the ever-changing needs of this stranger-becoming-a-person.

> The antinomy of hospitality irreconcilably opposes the law, in its universal singularity, to a plurality that is not only a dispersal (laws in the plural), but a structured multiplicity, determined by a process of division

> and differentiation: by a number of laws that distribute their history and their anthropological geography differently. (OH 79, emphasis in original)

But this is not the capacity to shift just anything just any way. Derrida reminds us that "conditional laws would cease to be laws of hospitality if they were not guided, given inspiration, given aspiration, required even, by the law of unconditional hospitality" (OH 79). That is, the duties you have toward this alien being are not determinate, but carry a determinate limit in the conditions necessary for its growth and thriving.

Then one day the curry powder is where the basil should be on the spice rack. One day you stare eye-to-eye with a face that is not quite yours, but not all so different either. The face of a new stranger born of the old, familiar one through a second slow, painful process of gestation that we call adolescence, a process to which you can only be a largely silent witness. And, because you are a woman and the language you speak, like the spice rack, has never been completely and unequivocally your own, you might understand something that remains unfamiliar to the *pater familias*, the Father/master of language. Because there is someone else in the house who might occasionally exercise his lordship over it by using a spice without returning it to its "proper" place on the rack, but also because the order of the spice rack might in fact vary as your cooking moves from the savory herbs of summer (basil, oregano, rosemary) to the sweet spices of the winter holidays (clove, ginger, cinnamon), you might recognize that these variations in the order of the spice rack, its availability for use by anyone, are the condition of possibility both for its usefulness for you and for the intimate stranger's usurpation of your power over it.

That is, you might see the spice rack as a metaphor for the maternal language that, Derrida tells us in *Monolingualism of the Other*, "is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable" (MO, 58). Nor, he reminds us in a marginal discussion of Hannah Arendt, is motherhood itself: "There is no maternity that does not appear subject to substitution, within the logic or threat of substitution" (MO, 88). But if motherhood exists only within an order of substitution, that is, within a language, what is one to make of the scene in *Monolingualism of the Other* that can only be described as the rape of the mother tongue?

> At a time when an incomprehensible guest, a newcomer without assignable origin, would make the said language come to him, forcing the language then to speak itself by itself, in another way, in his language. To speak by itself. But for him, and on his terms, keeping in her body the effaceable archive of this event: not *necessarily* an infant but a tattoo, a splendid form, concealed under garments in which blood mixes with ink to reveal all its colors to the sight. (MO, 51–52, emphasis mine).[8]

I would like to underscore here not only the sexualized violence against language, but also the equation of the tattoo and pregnancy that appears more in Derrida's text than in the Japanese film to which he refers in the footnote appended to this passage. In that film, moreover, the literal, if literary, sexual violence results, not in the death of the mother/wife/ concubine, as in the sources from the Western tradition that Derrida cites, but in that of the father and the child (MO, 78).

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Derrida closes *Of Hospitality* with those brutal stories I referred to earlier, citing them as cases in which "some people, as it has

been said, place the law of hospitality above a 'morality' or a certain 'ethics'" (OH 151). He then asks, "Are we the heirs to this tradition of hospitality?" (OH 155). But these stories, and the passage above, also raise the question of the *différance,* if I may, between the language of the mother, in the sense of what is said about her, to her, or through her, and the language of the mother in the sense of what she might say about herself. She might say, for instance, that an infant and a tattoo are not interchangeable, not even figuratively or provisionally, no matter what parallels might be drawn between the ways they are created in/on a woman's body.

To say that Derrida's commentary is not that of a woman is, of course, to state the more than obvious. What might be less obvious is that his discussions of sexual violence in both these texts is more than what a woman probably would not say—it is rather in some ways what a woman could not say. That is, his is at times a discourse predicated on a certain non-identity between himself as speaker/writer and the woman who is his object as well as the object of those who do violence to her. There seems to be no space in his text for my voice, even as commentary on his commentary, without violating his dictates about its scope and meaning, without reasserting "the possibility of the hospitality of the mother and of the mother tongue."[9]

Such a language, hospitality, or phenomenology of the mother might then serve to create further complications in the problem of language and the example that Derrida cites in *Monolingualism of the Other*: "What happens when someone resorts to describing an allegedly uncommon 'situation,' mine, for example, by testifying to it in terms that go beyond it, in a language whose generality takes on a value that is in some way structural, universal, transcendental, or ontological?" (MO, 19–20). He believes both in the uniqueness of his situation (which is already also the situation of his mother, among others) as a native speaker of French without either French heritage or any vestige of another "mother tongue," *and* in the universality of this deracinated relationship to one's own language in every case. That is, his situation is unique but also, because like motherhood it is of the order of language, always subject to substitution (the substitution of experiences found among indigenous peoples in North America, for example). But then, he asks, what is one to make of this universal power of the particular, or impossibility of the particular?

Or, to put the same question another way, if I have spoken here of "you" rather than "I," is that a universalization of language and experience that would continue the traditions that privilege women of my social group, or an expression of the paradoxical sameness and difference in any biological process, pregnancy say, that underlies its entry into language, tradition, idioms? Is it an expression of privilege or of reality to say that childbirth is painful, raising children hard?

When I mentioned the story about the spice rack at a party a few years ago, one of the other women remembered her sister doing the same thing in her attempt to differentiate herself from their mother and to make their parents' home her own. Others had never heard of such a thing, nor would I have asserted myself in the same way in my mother's kitchen. But the instant intelligibility of that story to all of the faculty women and faculty wives gathered in our hostess's kitchen while the men talked sports and institutional politics in the family room ("for a parricide can only be a son" [OH 9]), indicates the lasting truth of what Derrida notes parenthetically about Antigone's response to her father's refusal to allow her to mourn at his tomb: "(so it is definitely the question of the foreigner, in all senses, and the question of the woman foreign to the man.)" (OH 113). And the same might

be said in his own situation, however unique and exemplary it may be, as well.[10]

ENDNOTES

1. Iris Marion Young, "House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme," in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 134–64; reprinted in Nancy J. Holland and Patricia Huntington, eds., *Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2001), pp. 252–88.
2. Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 7. Hereafter, references will be indicated by OH and a page number.
3. This is a recent addition to Derrida's family circle: see my "The Death of the Other/Father: A Feminist Reading of Derrida's Hauntology," *Hypatia* 16 (2001): 64-71.
4. The stories he retells here are those of Lot and his daughters, and of the Levite of Ephraim (*Of Hospitality*, pp. 151–55).
5. Jacques Derrida, *Monoligualism of the Other OR The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 77. Hereafter, references will be indicated by MO and a page number.
6. The definitive work on this topic is Iris Marion Young's "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 9 (1984): 45–62; reprinted in Nancy Tuana and Rosemarie Tong, eds., *Feminism and Philosophy: Essential Readings in Theory, Reinterpretation, and Application* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995), pp. 407–19.
7. On this point, see for instance the work of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, to whom Derrida refers in *Monolingualism of the Other* (p. 93). For some unforeseen complications of this line of argument, see also Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Bantam, 1961), especially p. 577; and Drucilla Cornell, "Civil Disobedience and Deconstruction," *Cardozo Law Review* 13/4, pp. 1309ff.; reprinted in Nancy J. Holland, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1997), pp. 149–56.
8. Compare Derrida's discussion of Pierre Klossowski's *Roberte ce soir* in *Of Hospitality* (pp. 83–84 and 121ff.).
9. See my "In This Text Where I Never Am: Discourses of Desire in Derrida," in Hugh J. Silverman, ed., *Philosophy and Desire: Continental Philosophy VII* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 159–70.
10. For Debra Bergoffen, who asked "What about the mother?"—which made me think, among other things, "But I am the mother." And for Wendy.

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