The Blind-Spots of Kantian Hospitality

Jennifer Bagelman* and Jennifer Vermilyea**
*Durham University **McMaster University

Kant’s ‘enlightening’ project of hospitality paradoxically leaves us with the most violent of blind-spots. His hospitality sheds light on a universal humanity only by eclipsing and rendering speechless a multitude of lives outside the state, particularly the figure of the refugee. Although a Kantian hospitality depends upon a logic of governmentality, we suggest that where the figure of the refugee is concerned in his work, a sovereign power relation prevails. Here we draw upon, and move beyond, Giorgio Agamben to ask: If the refugee is simply reduced to speechless bare life in Kant’s framing, can there be political agency for this figure? Exploring the stories of two well-known migrant activists, Abas Amini and Merhan Nasseri, we suggest that the speechlessness and invisibility imposed through a Kantian hospitality may be transformed into political voice and presence in such a way that viscerally embodies Derrida’s assertion that ‘keeping silent is already a modality of possible speaking’ (Derrida 2000, p. 135).

Introduction

In order to stimulate political speech, asylum-seeker Abas Amini sewed his mouth shut; in order to make others hear he seamed his ears closed; and in order to make others see the violence he experienced, he stitched together the lids of his eyes. In so doing, Amini subverted his de-politicized body into a political site which viscerally shed light upon the blind-spots of a hospitality that renders him invisible. Amini’s political actions remind us of the many lives that are actively eclipsed through seemingly hospitable practices (Edkins & Pin-Fat 2004, p. 17).

Existing in a state of transit, Merhan Nasseri—another stateless figure—brought into critical presence the bordering practices
constitutive of hospitality which have left him without a home. Amidst the constant flow of faces, and the incessant hustle which epitomizes the Charles De Gaulle airport, Nasseri sat comfortably sprawled out with no hint of urgency in his face. Nasseri’s sedentary position in the place of transit began in 1988 when his passport, identification, and claim to a qualified political being were lost. The 13 years in which Nasseri lived in the airport, void of identification and thus supposedly political agency, has been coined the biggest blunder in human hospitality practices. That is to say, Nasseri appears to slip through the logic and rights of hospitality. However, for the purposes of this paper both Nasseri and Amini are interesting not because they represent a blunder or exception in human hospitality, but because they are precisely the logical extension of such practices. We suggest that these figures do not simply slip through the protection of hospitality, but are made by this form of protection. This paper does not claim to offer a complete story of these complex cases, nor does it assert they are emblematic of a generalizable experience of those seeking forms of asylum. Rather, this paper looks to Amini and Nasseri in order to offer a portal into the ways in which a statist logic situates certain figures within an exclusionary position, and how this is also being subverted. We aim to demonstrate how a particular Kantian-inspired statist logic, and the hospitality it engenders, functions as the condition of possibility for the blunder and exclusions which Nasseri and Amini embody. In light of this, the central problem we will explore is: where is political space for a stateless person in this form of hospitality?

In order to consider these problems we first outline the Kantian conception of hospitality as presented in _Perpetual Peace_ which, we argue, is conditioned upon the state-system. Particularly we will explore how Kant’s theory necessarily _conditions_ a purportedly _unconditional_ hospitality. Carefully we illuminate how Kant’s theory tends to offer a ‘universal humanity’ that also creates a fundamental division between valid standing in the world and those experiences and perspectives from which there can be no entry into that world (Kant 1991, p. 105). Kant’s hospitality rests upon a triple distinction between: citizens of a state, citizens of a foreign state, and the third subhuman category of the absolute other—one which is invisible yet whose very existence is necessary for the possibility of an understanding of a ‘universal humanity’ upon which perpetual peace rests.

To analyze the implications of Kant’s work we will continue by investigating Jacques Derrida’s critique, _Of Hospitality_. Here we will look at the ways in which hospitality functions through the need to know the other in a particular imperializing way. For Derrida, the question of hospitality is the ‘question of the question itself’ (Derrida 2000, p. 130). That is to say, it is precisely the need to gain knowledge of the other through questioning that should be problematized when considering a discourse of hospitality. Through this incessant questioning of the refugee, risk is effectively controlled and eliminated. With the help of Derrida we will ask, is a hospitality
which sets the parameters of the encounter and requires full knowledge of the stranger really all that hospitable? Perhaps, as Derrida suggests, such a form of hospitality in fact resembles a hostile approach to the other?

In the third section, we will shift to consider how the logic of governmentality operates in Kant's work. Specifically, we consider how a language of freedom is used as the justification for a statist logic, in that 'the state' will eventually become a precondition for its own eventual demise: the state is both the condition of possibility for man's telos, and that which becomes no longer necessary once we have reached that end point. While a language of governmentality is utilized to justify the state for free citizens, we argue that within the Kantian logic, for the figure of the refugee, power often operates less through a modality of freedom and agency and more through a mere administration of bodies. In this way the refugee is not someone who has political voice and agency, but—as Kant implies—merely a life to be saved. Here we will draw upon the work of Peter Nyers to specifically consider how the figure of the refugee is silenced through a discourse of lack and speechlessness implied in Kant's model.

Through this investigation of Kant's work the refugee emerges as a figure reduced to speechlessness, and devoid of agency. However, we would like to consider how this totalizing narrative itself imperializes the multiplicity of ways of being within and against this statist-humanitarian discourse. In the final section, we will consider the works of the later Foucault in order to shed critical light upon those pockets of freedom that are possible in even the most hostile and imperial of spaces. In particular, we will consider the ways in which certain practices can work to subvert the speechlessness imposed upon the refugee into a form of political voice and presence. It is here that we would like to take seriously Derrida's suggestion that 'Keeping silent is already a modality of possible speaking' (Derrida 2000, p. 135). We will look at both Nasseri and Amini who ostensibly epitomize those silencing practices of hospitality and yet find means to manoeuvre and come to voice even as they are situated within these power relations.

Methodologically, this paper does not claim to resolve the problems posed in the modern definition of the word resolve which is to make a firm decision about or to solve; instead, we will follow the Latin etymology of the word which is to loosen or undo. We hope to loosen the tightly knit logic of hospitality and humanitarianism which attempts to solve the problems that it in many cases creates. We wish to critique Kant, the figure who incessantly insists upon endings—a telos. In doing so, we do not seek to create an alternative end, but to offer as Boaventura De Sousa Santos does, 'incomplete answers' through 'constant questioning' (Santos 2007, p. 29). In this sense we agree with Foucault who feels that being faced with constant problems is not a source of regret, but gratification as this means there is always work to be done.
In Inhospitable Hospitality

For the purposes of this article we will turn our attention to Kant’s third definitive article in *Perpetual Peace*, ‘Cosmopolitan Right Shall be Limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality’. Rather than looking at hospitality through a lens of free trade—whereby nations are required to open their borders to a global market—we will analyze hospitality as it applies to refugee and humanitarian practices. While we agree with readings of Kant’s hospitality as each state’s ‘duty to […] open its border to the cosmopolitan right of voluntary “commerce” and free trade of other nations’, as persuasively put forth by Jim Tully, here we are primarily focused on hospitality as dealing with the flow of bodies rather than capital (Tully 2007, p. 16). We contend that both the free trade and refugee practices that are implicit in Kant’s notion of hospitality function as powerful mechanisms of exclusion, even today.

In *Perpetual Peace* Kant lays out hospitality as a universal human right. He clearly states that when speaking of hospitality ‘we are … concerned not with philanthropy but with right’ (Kant 1991, p. 105). To consider the implication of this delineation we must question both his understanding of ‘right’ and his conception of the ‘human’ entitled to this right.

We should remind ourselves that for Kant the term human—although said to be universal—in fact implies a very particular form of life. For Kant the state is the condition of possibility for the actualization of humanity. Without the state’s external guidance humans are unable to fulfill their teleology, and are thus not really human. Indeed, it is a crime against human nature to live without the state for the state is the condition under which our teleological progression towards peace must occur. Furthermore, those who live within the anarchic state of nature are considered equally chaotic and unpredictable, and thus must be looked upon with constant suspicion. Although it would appear that all hostile action is not to be tolerated, hostile action is perfectly acceptable and even necessary where the non-state actor is concerned:

> Man (or an individual people) in a mere state of nature robs me of any such security and injures me by virtue of this very state in which he co-exists with me. He may not have injured me actively (*facto*) but he does injure me by his very lawlessness of his state (*status iniusto*), for he is a *permanent threat* to me, I can require him either to enter into a common lawful state along with me, or to move away from my vicinity. (Kant 1991, p. 98)

In this way, while Kant claims to provide hospitality for all humans, those who are not included within this human category—namely non-state actors—are denied such treatment.

Vitally, Kant’s idea of right is predicated upon his conception of what it means to be human. One’s rights are guaranteed through one’s humanness: hospitality itself, as Kant suggests, is a ‘universal right of
humanity’ (Kant 1991, p. 108). It is by virtue of being human—which is premised upon life within the state—that one is entitled to rights. But then, what do non-state actors, those conceived by Kant as non-humans, have to appeal to? What of Nasseri? What of Amini? Put bluntly, if non-human then they are not entitled to the universal rights of humanity such as hospitality. It would seem that these non-humans—of whom Kant is incapable of conceiving but who he nonetheless includes through an exclusion—might rely on another form of hospitality, one based perhaps on friendship or philanthropy rather than on a human right. However, Kant excludes the possibility of philanthropy, or a ‘friendly agreement’, in his understanding of hospitality (Kant 1991, p. 105). For example, Kant denies the ‘right of a guest’, purely on the fact that such a right might require ‘a special form of friendly agreement’ (Kant 1991, p. 105). In this move, hospitality based on philanthropy—rather than right—is so obviously intolerable for Kant that he uses this as justification to deny the right of a guest.³ Kant’s evocation of right (which entitles humans) over philanthropy (which entitles those non-state actors excluded from Kant’s human category) is further justified due to the ability of a right to control and regulate those to whom hospitality is shown. A right, unlike a friendly agreement, can be consistent from case to case and can more efficiently regulate. Kant seems uneasy with philanthropy because it potentially entitles non-state actors to hospitality—a form of hospitality which cannot be so easily controlled and tracked as that which is based upon human right. The individual who acquires hospitality based on human rights is therefore a citizen of another state—as Kant’s conception of human implies life within a state. As such, this individual is more readily controlled and knowable as his history and identity can be known through the information that citizenship provides. On the other hand, there is a certain unknowability and contingency imbued in the friendly agreement which protects non-state actors. As the violently suspicious logic goes: how does one know and track the person void of a passport and citizenship?

Furthermore, how does one maintain the distinction between host/guest if the guest does not have a distinguishable—perhaps statist—identity through which that distinction may be maintained? This underlying fear is expressed in Kant’s denial of the guest, the guest is dangerous because ‘he might become a member of the native household for a certain time’ (Kant 1991, p. 106). We should linger a moment on this term might: it implies contingency and unpredictability—we cannot know how such a relationship, based on friendship rather than right, might unfold. Whereas an individual admitted based on right exists within a ‘society of others’—from which he is always distinguished—the individual admitted based on friendship ‘might become a member of the native household’ thereby breaking down the distinction between the guest/host, inside/outside (Kant 1991, p. 106).

In these ways the stipulations of hospitality for Kant—and perhaps his legitimization of a hospitality based on right—is that it must be able to
regulate and control. This is epitomized in his exuberance for ‘China and Japan ... [who] have wisely placed restrictions upon its [guests]’ (Kant 1991, p. 107, italics in original). Of course, this implies that it is unwise to allow guests into one’s territory without certain restrictions. As such, hospitality based on friendship is further undermined: for how does one impose restrictions upon a contingent and fluctuating relationship which might break down one’s superior ability to restrict?

Through these moves it becomes evident that there are three characters acting in the play of Kant’s *Perpetual Peace*. The first two are the citizen of a state and the citizen of another state (both of which are deemed human and as such are entitled to human rights). The third category is the absolute other who is not a citizen of any state and who must therefore appeal to the special friendly agreement which Kant rejects based on its contingency and threat to the host/guest relationship (Walker 2010, p. 57).

It is this third category of the absolute other, which is necessarily excluded by Kant, that enables him to posit an inclusive universal hospitality and cosmopolitan peace. It is only by blinding ourselves to those who are annexed from the category of human that Kant may suggest that it is universal. Kant contends that we need a cosmopolitan right—that ‘universal right of humanity’—because ‘only under this condition can we flatter ourselves that we are continually advancing towards a perpetual peace’ (Kant 1991, p. 108). As we have suggested, however, Kant’s very understanding of a universal right of humanity is conditioned upon the prior exclusion of those threatening characters without a state. So too, the very purpose of hospitality is to maintain and reinforce borders/identities between an inside and an outside; therefore, what Kant’s hospitality justifies is not a universal community but a community of boxes and borders.

It is unlikely however that Kant would have been surprised by this salient paradox in his work, for he himself maintains that ‘nearly everything is paradoxical’ (Kant 1991, p. 59). Kant would also, however, likely be aware that such a paradox serves a political purpose, namely that of a regulative ideal. While *Perpetual Peace* is not necessarily a realizable end, it is necessary for Kant that we keep that end in mind in order to justify our present state-system and the life it engenders. This paradox allows us to continually construct a story of an inclusive cosmopolitan humanity—one which is based on an unconditional hospitality through the prior exclusion of an array of possible experiences and ways of being. Effectively, Kant’s origin stories condition a purportedly unconditional hospitality and—most importantly—allow us to forget these violent exclusions in the process.

**The Question of Domesticating Risk**

To cut through the ways in which hospitality is conditioned in Kant’s work we will now consider Derrida’s critique, *Of Hospitality*. Specifically, we will begin by exploring the violences that Derrida
suggests are enacted in the seemingly neutral question that Kant requires us to ask of the other: what is your name?

As we have shown, for Kant we can only accept the 'other' so long as he is a citizen of another state. This is implied in his statement that a nation will unconditionally accept a foreigner 'so long as he behaves in a peaceable manner' (Kant 1991, p. 105). As we know, for Kant peace is not attainable in the state of nature; it can only occur and flourish under the guidance and protection of the state. In this way, it is insinuated through Kant's work that it is only safe to accept a foreigner so long as he is part of a state—which ensures his peacefulness—and identifiable through this state citizenship. For the stateless being 'robs [man] of any such security' (Kant 1991, p. 98). This seemingly minimal requirement—namely that the foreigner must be a citizen of a state—therefore requires a certain set of questions: who are you; where are you from? It is precisely this basic question, however, that has violent ramifications. Most obviously, this excludes those who fall outside of this state-centric question, those like Nasseri and Amini. The same question which functions as the basis for granting rights of hospitality also functions to deny the most basic of rights. For instance, the passport—which is symbolic of the very question who are you; where are you from—at once enables the rights of citizenship and hospitality and simultaneously disables any pathway to hospitality that is not always-already situated within the state. Nasseri, the man without a country, becomes the man without a claim to Kant's hospitality.

Arguably, the purpose of these questions is to establish a form of hospitality devoid of risk. The question which determines where one is from—and who precisely one is—limits hospitality to the terrain of the safe, the knowable. We can see this functioning by returning to Kant's stipulation that hospitality must be premised upon knowable rights and not contingent mights. That is to say, for Kant, hospitality cannot rest upon the unpredictability implied in the friendly agreement, for example, because this agreement may involve a number of unpredictable outcomes. To remind ourselves, Kant is fearful that the friendly agreement may lead to the stranger 'becoming a member of the homeland' (Kant 1991, p. 105). Instead, hospitality must be predicated upon rights as they set out the conditions and limits of hospitality prior to the encounter.

This conception of hospitality that attempts to limit if not eliminate risk is, we suggest, deeply problematic. We cannot call a hospitality that knows its visitors in their entirety hospitable. It would seem that hospitality requires openness, not only to what one knows but also to what one does not know. To be meaningfully hospitable it is not enough to simply accept the guest only upon a prepared invitation, but also to be open to the unexpectedness of a stranger. As Derrida suggests:
Pure unconditional or infinite hospitality cannot and must not be anything else but an acceptance of risk. If I am sure that the newcomer that I welcome is perfectly harmless, innocent, that [s]he will be beneficial to me … it is not hospitality. When I open my door I must be ready to take the greatest of risks. (Derrida 2000, p. 12)

Of course, headlines consistently tell us that hospitality without limits is unrealistic and threatening; however, we contend that hospitality conditioned by the elimination of risk masks even greater violences. Or as Derrida suggests, ‘unconditional hospitality is always a risky endeavour, hospitality without risk usually hides more serious violence’ (Derrida 2000, p. 13). Indeed, our borders function to deny refugees based on the dangers they may impose upon us which thereby legitimates the potentially violent outcome of the refugee returning to their homeland. The logic of this Kantian hospitality functions to say: If we do not accept you to our state, you are not our citizen; therefore, we have no responsibility for your life.

The other central problem entwined in the Kantian line of questioning explored previously is the way in which difference is domesticated and encoded within the language of the host. In order to answer the particular question—where are you from?—the foreigner is required to speak in a 'language which is … not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State' (Derrida 2000, p. 33). It is not his language in a dual sense: first, perhaps, he must be translated into another vernacular; second, the non-state actor must respond in the language he cannot identify with, that of the state. In both cases there is no welcoming of the other as other, but instead a reading of the other through the dominant voice of the host. Perhaps this act of translation is, as Derrida suggest, ‘the first act of violence’ (Derrida 2000, p. 15). Indeed, this is the first act in that it is the necessary qualification before the invitation may even occur.

Barely Heard Life?

Thus far, we have considered how the language of the state system and the world historical development model operate in Kant’s work and how they condition an understanding of what it means to be human. At this point, we shift towards an exploration of how Kant’s work on hospitality functions through a modality of governmentality. We understand governmentality here in the Foucauldian sense as a power which functions through a language of normalization and choice. In this way, freedom becomes an instrument of power and control, where power does not operate from above, telling its subjects what to do, but instead operates through a language of normalization and choice. In conjunction with governmentality, we would like to consider how biopower is functioning in Kant’s work to produce a certain type of politically qualified life. Like governmental power, biopower operates not through a language of coercion and force but through a language of optimization and facilitation. As Foucault suggests, the power over death became the power over life: it was no longer the power to let
live or make die, but the power to make live or let die (Foucault 1978, p. 138). Foucault’s notion of biopower highlights the way in which power operates—through a language of facilitation—to control those under its sway, to produce a certain type of politically qualified life as the normalized identity of subjectivity. In other words, practices of power do not deny the autonomy of subjects so much as they work ‘to impose and fix ways of knowing and doing that shall be recognized as natural and necessary to autonomous being’ (Ashley & Walker 1990, p. 260).

While Kant is not generally thought of as a theorist of governmentality, we feel that it is precisely through this governmental power his theories become so influential. For Kant, it is our asocial nature combined with our ability to reason that leads man into a state of security and sociability. It is man’s reasonable choice to enter into the state. While man must have the law coercively imposed upon him by a master in order to establish the basis for development of a lawful order, this imposition is predicated upon a choice. In this way the state is justified through a language of freedom itself: it is only through the guidance of the state that man can emerge to reach his telos, and moreover that humanity as a whole may attain perpetual peace. Perpetual peace and freedom are only possible after the moral development of humanity under the guidance of the state. Seemingly, this is a story that would eventually render the state redundant—namely that man in his full maturity could exist without external tutelage. The interesting question here is not necessarily is perpetual peace possible but rather what political purpose does the ideal serve and regulate in the present? To our mind it serves as a means of conducting conduct through a language of enablement and—paradoxically—freedom.

Through this governmental power certain types of life can be ranked according to their position along this line of development. In effect, what this story implies is that those people who do not exist within the state are not able to progress. Here we can see the implications of biopower as a mechanism to distinguish between life that is politically qualified and those types of life that do not even have the potential to become full human beings—non-state actors.

Although we see a language of governmentality deployed in Kant’s work that serves to justify the state and humanity’s movement towards perpetual peace, governmentality alone is not a sufficient lens through which to understand the figure of the refugee that emerges in his work. We suggest that there is something else functioning in Kant’s hospitality which operates less through a language of freedom and agency than through a mere administration of bodies. Here we suggest an analysis of sovereign power is necessary.

Although significant scholarship has offered a persuasive and nuanced critique of Giorgio Agamben’s historical trajectory about ‘the’ foundational exclusion, Agamben’s analysis becomes important to
consider with Foucault where the figure of the refugee is concerned in Kant's work on hospitality. Agamben refers back to the Greek distinction between forms of life to suggest that as early as Aristotle, biopolitics was functioning in its ability to determine a politically qualified life. According to Agamben, only a select group of people were capable of living the politically qualified life as citizens; the rest were represented in terms of a bare or naked form of unqualified existence. The state (polis) was the sphere assigned to the existence of the politically qualified life, whereas those who possessed merely ‘bare’ or ‘naked’ life were confined to the domestic sphere (oikos). As Agamben has famously (or perhaps infamously) argued, the classical distinction between forms of life, however, became superseded in the modern era when bare life itself became politicized. That is to say, ‘bare human life was made immanent to the ontogenetic practices of constituting the sovereign subjects and spaces of modern conceptions of the political’ (Agamben 1998, p. 39). As Agamben states, ‘The entry of zoé into the sphere of the polis—the politicisation of bare life as such—constitutes the decisive event in modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought’ (Agamben 1998, p. 4). By entering into the political sphere, bare life became included in the form of exclusion.

While Agamben’s account often imposes totalizing distinctions, his analytical point about how the figure of the refugee is often constituted not as a life defined by and controlled through a language of freedom and facilitation—the normalizing practices of disciplinary and biopower of Foucault—but rather a life often devoid of even the operationalized type of freedom of which Foucault speaks, is vital. With regard to the figure of the refugee that is produced in Kant’s theoretical model, it is not so much a relationship of governmental power—where power is positive and productive—but rather a relationship of violence, where life is exposed to the violent limit of sovereign power, that demands careful attention. As Jenny Edkins and Veronique Pin-Fat suggest,

> What we have in the camps is not a power relation. Power is no longer necessary: it is no longer necessary, for example, in its role as constitutive of subjectivities, because there is no longer a subject—just bare life. But more to the point, if power relations are productive as Foucault tells us, there is no such thing, no subject, no anything that is being produced in the camp. All we have is bare life being administered. (Edkins & Pit-Fat 2004, p. 9)

In short, it is not sufficient to talk about power, in the Foucauldian sense, where the figure of the refugee is concerned. Governmental power is something that produces and constitutes subjectivities; however, where subjectivity is actively delimited (as is the case in Kant’s framing) this particular form of power recedes and mere administration and violence have a very real tendency to prevail.

We see this reduction and mere administration of life evident in Kant’s work on hospitality in which he states that the visitor ‘can be turned away, if this can be done without causing his death’ (Kant 1991, p. 226).
105). In this articulation, the visitor—ostensibly the refugee—is stripped to survival mode. In this expression the refugee is debased to the barest existence: they are simply lives to be saved. As Peter Nyers suggests, the refugee is left with a basic existence, one which is ‘not a full humanity (full in the sense that he or she is cultured, capable of reasoned speech) but a thin humanity (a bare, naked life, an animal)’ (Nyers 2006, p. 74). Problematically, through this reduction of the refugee, political agency is emptied and their subjectivity is defined only through lack. What is politically most at stake in this emptying is that ‘refugees are silent—or rather silenced—because they do not possess the proper political subjectivity (i.e. state citizenship) through which they can be heard. Refugees are negatively defined as registering a twofold lack with respect to the privileged resolutions to questions of political identity (citizenship) and community (nation-state) (Nyers 2006, p. 17).

Crucially, the refugee is not stripped of his voice per se, but of his political speech. The refugee is placed outside where political life is said to occur (the state) and thus his political speech is erased and all he has left is the animal voice. Indeed, Aristotle distinguished between two forms of communication: the first being the ‘mere possession of a voice (phônê) which all animals’ have; the second being limited to a ‘qualified form of life [which] is the unique human capacity for speech (logos)’ (Nyers 2006, p. 38). Voice is only the ability to cry out pleasure and pain; whereas speech is the ability to express what is useful and harmful, just and unjust, good and evil and so on. Again as Nyers contends, according to dominant accounts in the received traditions of political theory, ‘this politically qualified life finds its peculiar existence within the state (polis) and expresses its identity in the figure of the citizen’ (Nyers 2006, p. 38).

Throughout Kant’s work on hospitality we see the language of governmentality operating through the citizen of the state; however, as many have shown—where the refugee is concerned what is often left is the mere administration of lives to be saved. The refugee is not left with reason; he is only left with fear—the fear that he may not live. In and through this logic the refugee is devoid of his rationality and ability to speak politically; therefore, his communication becomes a mere voice where all we can hear are his animalistic screams of pleasure and pain.

**Blind Sight; Voiceless Speech?**

It would appear that through Kant’s theory of hospitality, the refugee is in fact rendered speechless and devoid of agency. If the life of the refugee is simply that which cannot be killed, where is political life for this figure? Cracks in this all-encompassing narrative emerge, we suggest, when we move from a more generic logic to grounded cases. Here we turn to two individuals who ostensibly epitomize the silencing practices of hospitality and yet find means to maneuver and speak within them.
In May 2003, Amini, an Iranian seeking asylum in the United Kingdom (UK), famously protested the UK government’s treatment of asylum seekers by going on a hunger strike. In addition to resisting food and water, he also sewed his own ears, eyes and mouth with coarse thread. Of this he said, ‘I sewed my eyes so others could see, I sewed my ears so others could hear, I sewed my mouth to give others a voice’ (Edkins & Pin-Fat 2004, p. 17). Even after reaching a successful asylum claim, Amini did not relent. On the contrary, he claimed that his action was not just on his own behalf but for all asylum seekers: ‘I have come to realize that there is a very important struggle to be continued’. In an interview with The Guardian he revealed of his actions, ‘yes, it was political; professional psychologists have all determined that I am not psychologically damaged and have no mental illness, but the pressure on me was so huge that I got to the point that I thought there was no hope’ (Edkins & Pin-Fat 2004, p. 17).

As Jenny Edkins and Veronique Pin-Fat have suggested, Amini’s political action viscerally reveals how his own person has been reduced to a form of bare life by the seemingly protective practices of hospitality. By bringing the hospitality practices that imposed silence upon him into shocking visibility, Amini unmasked the violences of this very hospitality that depend upon being continually masked. By physically disabling his ability to speak—and in so doing demanding someone communicate for him—Amini illustrated the ways in which refugees are always-already politically silenced and forced to have another speak on their behalf. Crucially, he claimed back the possibility of speaking politically—even through his silence.

In this way, we suggest, through this act of resistance Amini physically embodies Derrida’s assertion that ‘Keeping silent is already a modality of possible speaking’ (Derrida 2000, p. 135). By inscribing the power-relations upon himself, Amini’s body becomes a visible reminder of the violences which have been made invisible. In this way, Amini is both ‘blind and [yet] super-seeing’ in that he draws attention to that which our own eyes cannot, or refuse, to see (Derrida 2000, p. 135). So too, his silence becomes the most audible of voices.

In a similar vein, as travelers frantically rush to pass through the space of transit to get home, Nasseri existed as the speech-less person who nonetheless seemed to whisper through his very presence: the practices through which you find and secure your home, have rendered me homeless. By bringing our own blindness of the violences enacted in the seemingly smooth flow of circulating bodies into visibility, Nasseri made audible what might otherwise go unheard. The routine act of swiping a passport, of checking a flight number, or going through security are interrupted by the image of a man who waits not for a flight, but for recognition and right. For 13 years this borderland became his home, and in so doing made the invisible border—and its implications—painfully visible.
Perhaps, in this way, Amini and Nasseri exhibit what Foucault refers to as situated freedom. Both these super-seeing individuals find a space of freedom within the context of subordination; they find not an essential freedom, that which Kant holds open as part of his regulative ideal, but one constituted by agonism which is made possible by their very struggles within and against relations of power. Amini and Nasseri come to symbolize agonistic combat, likened to a wrestling match, with the power that seeks to deny their entry into this match altogether (Foucault 1983, p. 225). In this way, the refugee who—for Kant—is to be protected and saved reclaims his ability to resist the hospitality practices which make him politically paralysed. This act of resistance not only serves to combat his paralysis, but also our political atrophy that is maintained through unchallenged processes of hospitality.

Conclusion

Kant's enlightening project of hospitality paradoxically leaves us with violent blind-spots, which have hostile effects. His hospitality produces and sheds light on a universal humanity; however, this is only possible by eclipsing a multitude of lives that exist outside the state. In so doing the eclipsed are rendered speechless and blind and we too easily become deaf and sightless to them. Indeed, to recognize the state-less being as a human-being would be, according to Kant, to rob ourselves of security and perpetual peace.

In this paper we have especially aimed to demonstrate how Kant's unconditional hospitality is necessarily conditioned upon a state-centric logic. In this way Nasseri—the man without a country—is not a blunder to hospitality; Kant's hospitality in fact creates and reproduces his absences. Similarly, Amini is not an exception to refugee practices: he embodies the bordering constitutive of hospitality par excellence. His speechlessness is produced in and through a hospitality which renders his life nothing but a mere life to be saved. Although the figure of the refugee functions as a constitutive outside within a Kantian hospitality, we have suggested that in some cases it is precisely through transforming speechlessness and blindness into a form of political agency that the violent blind-spots of such a hospitality can be brought into critical and material presence.

Jennifer Bagelman is a lecturer in Geography at Durham University and can be contacted at: Jennifer.Bagelman@durham.ac.uk

Jennifer Vermilyea is a lecturer in Political Science at McMaster University and can be contacted at: vermiljr@mcmaster.ca
Notes

1 Rather than offer an extended argument for the philosophical influence of Kant on the modern system of states, which is clearly beyond the scope of this article, please refer to R.B.J. Walker, *After the Globe before the World*. Here Walker argues that Kant is ‘indisputably at the heart of the most persistent accounts of what it means to speak about political life within a modern system of states’ (2010, p. 15).

2 As Walker’s extended reading of Kant suggests, there is an *a priori* assumption in the Kantian canon that to fully develop one must work within a particular sovereign state. Indeed, without laying claim to such a context the non-state person is denied the possibility of political subjectivity or indeed, progress afforded through the state and system of states. ‘All relations of universality and particularity’ must be worked out ‘within any particular sovereign state that supposedly enables the reconciliation of universality and particularity within states, or within the system of states that supposedly enables the reconciliation of universality and particularity between states’ (2010, p. 57).

3 Derrida’s account might seem closer to Kant’s than first appears. Derrida, much like Kant, also says that even impossible or unconditional hospitality requires laws that make that hospitality conditional. For instance, we see this expressed in the following passage: ‘even while keeping itself above the laws of hospitality, the unconditional law of hospitality needs the laws, it requires them. This demand is constitutive. It wouldn’t be effectively unconditional, the law, if it didn’t have to become effective, concretely determined’ (Derrida 2000, p. 79). The question we wish to open up by evoking Derrida is: how are these ‘laws’ constituted and practiced? For Derrida, law is not necessarily an overarching or *a priori* principle but rather contingent upon the encounter.

References


