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The Mediterranean Sea has always been a site of crossings, encounters and becomings. Since the early 2010s, however, migrants coming primarily from Africa and West Asia now cross the water knowing that they are voyaging between life and death, and increasingly, they see that they test the limits of the hospitality that those on the northern shores of the Mediterranean are willing to extend. The Mediterranean becomes what Édouard Glissant refers to as a “matrix” of migrant precarity, particularly as European governments abdicate any responsibility for those boats that capsize on the high seas.¹ After their perilous journey across the Mediterranean, migrants are unsure as to whether Europeans will grant them a hospitable reception, or, for that matter, allow them to remain. In a world where “millions and millions of living beings—human or not—who are denied not only their basic ‘human rights,’ which date back two centuries and are constantly being refined, but first of all the right to a life worthy of being lived,” questions of migration and hospitality, particularly through an engagement with the work of Jacques Derrida, become more urgent than ever.²

The influx of migrants not only in the Mediterranean, but globally, challenges us to consider what happens when the Other enters, and what kind of hospitality such an entry provokes. This essay proposes Derridean hyperbolic hospitality as a means through which to extend welcome to and live with the Other. Through hyperbolic hospitality, the host can never be hospitable *enough*. That is, an ethic of hyperbolic hospitality is impossible and ungraspable, yet we reach for it, blindly.³ The question of hospitality becomes one wherein the host must allow the guest (the Other) to learn to live, not from nor through the host, but because of the hospitable welcome the host provides.⁴ To learn not only to live, but to live well, is a right, Derrida insists, and it is one which only an unconditional hospitality can provide. *Is hyperbolic hospitality tenable?*

Many media outlets and activists criticize xenophobic trends in Europe wherein governments disregard the human rights of migrants by perpetuating dehumanizing rhetoric, refusing asylum or abdicating their responsibility to save and welcome precarious populations from outside. Derrida charges that waves of xenophobia marked by a refusal of responsibility and hospitality to the Other signify a global problem that plagues European countries in particular, although there are very few, if any, spaces anywhere that extend unconditional hospitality to all populations seeking refuge. He argues that “there is no country or nation-state in the world today, especially in the rich, capitalist countries, where [there is not] this policy of border closings, this putting-into-hibernation of the principles of asylum, of hospitality to the foreigner.”⁵ Derrida charges that imperial logics foreground European conceptualizations of hospitality as conditional, and underpin immigration policies that prioritize the “best interests” of the host rather than the well-being of the incoming guest.

In recent years, however, Lampedusa, the largest island in Italy's Pelagie archipelago, has become a primary site through which migrants cross from the Mediterranean's southern shores into Europe. A seemingly idyllic coastal enclave that has, for centuries, been at the crossroads between the southern and northern Mediterranean shores, residents and the government of Lampedusa now question whether they can or will extend hospitality to North African migrants, in particular, who search for more opportunities both on the island and in mainland Europe. Media outlets and activists increasingly applaud Lampedusa residents and government officials for their “level of humanity which cannot be found elsewhere,” in stark contrast to other European states and the mainland of its own country, Italy, whose current leader, Giorgia Meloni, won the Prime Minister position on and continues to perpetuate an anti-migrant campaign.⁶ In contrast to their mainland European counterparts, Mayor of Lampedusa, Filippo Mannino, insists that the people of Lampedusa “will not look the other way” as migrants reach their shores in search of a better life.⁷ Mannino accepted the Golden San Michele Prize on behalf of the community of Lampedusa in October 2023 for “welcoming and sheltering migrants.” Those in Lampedusa will welcome migrants to the island, which Mayor of Castiglione Fiorentino, Mario Agnelli, refers to as a “paradise on earth.”⁸ Despite limited resources and space, the Lampedusa government and residents display levels of hospitality to migrants is unlike any other European coastal space, showing a willingness to exceed their own resources and capabilities to welcome and provide a site of refuge.

In this context, Lampedusa represents a space of hope, welcoming and hospitality for migrants crossing the Mediterranean. At the same time, however, residents have begun to challenge the sort of hospitality and welcoming practices the island extends due to the perceived strain on public resources and lack of adequate government support for coordinating and

assisting the high volume of arriving migrants. In September 2023, the island's residents organized a protest against the arrival of migrants and the Lampedusa government's openness to accepting them, arguing that the island "cannot carry the weight of the world."⁹ The residents of Lampedusa voice two concerns: that migrants come to the island in the first place and that, when they do indeed arrive, they want to remain. Instead, Lampedusa residents hope to either curb migration to the small island before they must extend gestures of hospitality, or to act as a conveyor belt that transfers migrants to other spaces in Europe. In other words, residents want to keep migrants from coming at all or, if such a prohibition fails, they hope to forcibly transfer migrants to other European countries because they "won't let their island become the migrants' new home."¹⁰ Lampedusa residents no longer want to "learn to live with" the Other and foster communal integration with migrants—they refuse to do so. In alignment with this wave of hostility toward migrants, Lampedusa's government blocked a shipment of tents,¹¹ revealing a new strategy to make Lampedusa inhospitable for long-term settlement—you may enter, these gestures suggest, but you may never stay. Lampedusa residents pursue a logic that cohabitation with the Other is untenable; their protests insist that residents can only live in the absence of the Other, thus insisting, in a rejection of hospitality, that the community can only provide for those deemed fellow citizens.

Despite opposing the influx of migrants, Lampedusa residents also challenge border militarization measures that attempt to curb migration. This resistance to militarized bordering measures is not necessarily a gesture of hospitality, however. As residents of the island declare that they "will not let Lampedusa become Alcatraz," they point out that "recent restrictions to the movement of non-European migrants have...proven unsuccessful in curbing 'unwanted' migration flows."¹² Instead of feeling compelled to militarize its borders further, Lampedusans seek to curb migration before it begins, before the Other even reaches their shores.¹³ These calls are, therefore, neither pacifist nor humanist; on the contrary, they embody a preventative and immunitary logic: When faced with the Other, there will, inevitably, be militarization; thus, the Other should not come to "their" shores the first place. Such calls reveal the public revocation of hospitality and its prospect before it can be offered (or denied) to the Other—the a priori insistence on a refusal of hospitality in the hopes of dissuading migrants from entering, while revealing that the people to whom residents feel most responsible are themselves and their fellow citizens. The persistent locking down of borders to immunize the European Self against the Other shows that "at a time when we claim to be lifting internal borders, we proceed to bolt the external borders of the European Union tightly."¹⁴

Derrida proposes that "borders are no longer places of passage; they are places of interdiction, thresholds one regrets having crossed, boundaries back toward which one urgently escorts, threatening figures of ostracism, of

expulsion, of banishment, of persecution.”¹⁵ Derrida thinks the threshold throughout his oeuvre as a liminal space in which one makes a turn toward a new place, imaginary or community, while simultaneously turning away from that with which one identified previously. As Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani write, in the oceanic landscape in particular, “the line of the border has become [an] elastic”¹⁶ threshold wherein demarcations of sovereignty are porous. Conceptualizing the ocean-as-threshold is central to the project of “bring[ing] the sea to bear witness to how it has been made to kill” migrants.¹⁷ The idea of porous borders-as-thresholds is particularly important when looking to island spaces such as Lampedusa, where borders and bounds of responsibility, belonging and hospitality extend or are revoked in ways that mirror the waves—ethereal, ever-changing, sometimes placid and inviting, and in other moments violent and threatening. Like the ocean, the border becomes an ever-shifting threshold and frontier for entry; states take advantage of the watery nature of jurisdiction in the high seas to abdicate responsibility and imagine hospitality as conditional.

Heller and Pezzani recall how, “until recently, most Mediterranean states had refrained from extending exclusive claims beyond their territorial waters, for fear of getting entangled in thorny legal conflicts and of reducing the navigational advantages guaranteed by the high seas.”¹⁸ However, recent “accelerated juridicalization” of the Mediterranean’s high seas, largely in response to the influx of migrants crossing the waters, has led to “overlaps, conflicts of delimitation, and differing interpretations that have been the byproduct of the recent carving up of the sea”¹⁹—in other words, the Mediterranean now displays a patchwork of “elastic sovereignties” and jurisdictions. Heller and Pezzani charge that these overlapping zones of jurisdiction “ha[ve] become an integral part of the capacity of states and other actors to apply rights and abide by obligations at sea selectively according to their interests, expanding and retracting their jurisdictional claims at will.”²⁰ This process of picking and choosing when to comply with and act on their jurisdiction enables states to “intercept migrants or to evade the obligation to rescue people in distress.”²¹ The ever-shifting maritime border (which we can read as an elastic Derridean threshold) thus becomes a space where hospitality can be extended or revoked, and where the migrant, as they cross the seas, has no guarantee of safety, hospitable reception or the right to live.

An engagement with migration to Lampedusa via the Mediterranean “sea[,] where borders can be neither traced nor held and where freedom reigns absolute,”²² requires that we delve into the ways in which the ocean itself becomes a space of opportunity, death and dehumanization, as Glissant shows. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant conceptualizes the ocean, the ship and the condition of dis-location in relation to the Middle Passage across the Atlantic. Glissant understands that “exile can be borne, even when it comes as a bolt from the blue”²³ through “the belly of the boat,” which is “a womb, a womb abyss.”²⁴ The abyss reflects and projects both a (social, political,

spiritual, and many times physical/literal) death, but also a birth. The abyss is a site of infinite births, becomings and metamorphoses. At the same time, it becomes the space where anonymity, disappearance, commodification and namelessness haunt. These contradictions of being born into a precarious abyssal being that is denied subjectivity, embodies the hauntings of the belly of the ship-turned-womb abyss. The ship becomes a “womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death.”²⁵ For Glissant, the identity of the enslaved person is unmade and remade in the belly of the slave ship as it crosses the Atlantic. The boat and the “depths of the sea” together are the sites of becoming for what he refers to as the “transplanted population.”²⁶ The hostility of the Atlantic and the enslavers aboard the ship make the ocean and the boat spaces of the becoming dehumanized, of the becoming Other of the enslaved subject. Or, rather, the boat and ocean are twin sites wherein the enslaved subject sees the consequences of becoming or being Other(ed) in a world that is inhospitable to those who diverge from the European Self. The boat becomes the place where individuals are transmuted into commodified labor, where the human is dehumanized and where the Black subject becomes capital—and, as Rinaldo Walcott writes, “blackness itself is birthed in salt water—the Atlantic Ocean as a first instance—and then later becomes a kind of saline embodiment of early modern new life forms or Black selves.”²⁷ The ocean and the boat become hauntings as they transport the migrant to a place that “no ancestor will haunt” in a new and hostile land.²⁸

Glissant reveals the importance of looking to the ocean as a unit of analysis because it is, as Isabel Hofmeyr explains when referring to the Indian Ocean, a “connective tissue”²⁹—a space of becoming and a site of birth, death and “melancholic” crossings.³⁰ Heeding Derrida, it may be exactly because the Mediterranean is a “connective tissue” that it provokes such hostility from European governments. The Mediterranean produces a “geography of proximity” amongst Europe, North Africa and West Asia—these migrants are not from a distant elsewhere, per se, but rather from “‘close to the close,’ that unbearable orb of intimacy that melts into hate.”³¹ Roberto Esposito, another Mediterranean thinker, agrees, provoking that the originary violence of communities, which serves to construct and fortify boundaries between communal Self and Other, is born “not because of the differences between [people]” but “because they aren’t different enough, which is to say they kill each other because of the excessive equality between them.”³² Derrida and Esposito read hate or rejection as being born of proximity to the Other, constructed by xenophobic understandings that the Self may only exist in relation to an abject Other—one born of the Mediterranean’s connective prowess.

Although a context distinct from the Mediterranean, Glissant’s conceptualization of the slave ship and the Atlantic Ocean as active catalysts, spaces of encounter, and of death and becoming, are particularly salient when

conceptualizing contemporary migration. The Mediterranean, too, becomes a space of killing, of death—of dying and death, although it is distinct from the Middle Passage in large part because Mediterranean migrants are not part of a larger system of trans-oceanic enslavement. In stark contrast to Derrida's experience of the crossing Mediterranean as a young Algerian with French citizenship studying in the Metropole, where the sea became a site of opportunity (and estrangement), contemporary migrants traveling from North Africa to Europe's southern shores today do not find a hospitable welcome or access to social mobility and inclusion (however strained Derrida's relationship to colonial France may have been). Derrida's Mediterranean crossing was defined not by Blackness but by his Judeo-Franco-Maghrebian identity (which has its own set of subjectivities) and the possession of a French passport, which he inherited due to the 1870 Décret Crémieux—although it was a precarious citizenship, being revoked and re-granted during and post-Vichy regime. Derrida found refuge in a France that extended hospitality to him, because, despite being from what Chelsea Shields refers to as “offshore”³³ France, he was a French citizen. North African migrants today, on the other hand, are often marked by Arabness, Blackness and Islam, and do not possess a European passport. These migrants, unlike those transported during the Middle Passage, are often not kidnapped, but rather flee their homes due to the conditions created by hyper-capitalism, imperialism, neocolonialism, coercive global flows of capital, and a resulting failure of the postcolonial state, all of which render their own governments unable to secure their citizens' well-being. Although distinct from trans-Atlantic enslavement, contemporary North African migrants, like those enslaved Africans about whom Glissant writes, experience the dangers of oceanic crossings and the processes of becoming-nameless, becoming-Other, and becoming-haunted by the ocean and the boat-turned-womb abyss.

Contemporary migrants who cross the Mediterranean confront the abdication of responsibility by those European coastal states that take advantage of the sea as a space of watery jurisdiction. Like the Africans who were killed through being thrown off or jumping overboard during the horrors of Middle Passage, the deaths of migrants today “have rarely been established with precision and the responsibility for them has seldom been determined.”³⁴ As we write of the Middle Passage, we can now think about the Mediterranean Passage—these clandestine crossings and “the desire to go undetected [are] always weighed against the risk of dying unnoticed at sea.”³⁵ And, because African migrant deaths go unnoticed and their bodies remain unnamed, “many more lives have been lost without being recorded other than the haunting absence experienced by their families.”³⁶ Heller and Pezzani trace “the conditions in which the sea becomes a liquid trap” and an indifferent or “unwilling killer.”³⁷ We can read Glissant in the context of the Mediterranean to see how it becomes what Sam Okoth Opondo and Michael J. Shapiro refer to as the “precarity, disposability, and the thresholds of

detectability characteristic of today's migratory condition," all of which are defined by an abdication of national and international responsibility.³⁸

Heller and Pezzani provide a salient means through which to conceptualize the Mediterranean as a space of precarity and death for African migrants that cross. They point to a paradox in the governing and oversight of the Mediterranean: European governments persistently abdicate responsibility for migrant lives due to liquid and ethereal zones of jurisdiction, while simultaneously hyper-militarizing the high seas and policing migrant bodies. Through a strategic use of the Mediterranean, Heller and Pezzani argue, coastal governments can "[kill] without touching" migrants through the "policing of illegalized migrants at sea."³⁹ This condition of precarity and death-via-abandonment:

[H]as become an integral part of the capacity of states and other actors to apply rights and abide by obligations at sea selectively according to their interests, expanding and retracting their jurisdictional claims at will – for example to intercept migrants or to evade the obligation to rescue people in distress.⁴⁰

The Mediterranean – hyper-militarized and policed, yet abandoned as states, whether in a calculated manner or not, neglect their responsibility to protect human life – becomes a contested site of migrant precarity. Indeed, as Heller and Pezzani show, "crossings and deaths were occurring in a space populated by a large number of Western states' military ships and patrol aircrafts, and there were strong indications that military forces were failing in their obligation to rescue migrants" in cases such as the left-to-die boat wherein at least 63 migrants died.⁴¹ Although European coastal states heavily police the bodies that cross the Mediterranean, they refuse any responsibility or hospitality – and indeed refuse the right to life of the migrants – and play a key role in making the Mediterranean a deadly space. The sea becomes the site wherein migrants learn that European hospitality relies not only on the ability to extend welcome and care, but also hostility and negligence, strategic or otherwise – or, as Derrida refers to it, "hostipitality."⁴² Because "migrants do not only die at sea but through a strategic use of the sea," they experience as they cross it the ways in which European states will take advantage of the sea's watery lines of sovereignty to abdicate any responsibility to protect the lives and livelihoods of those "Others" who are not citizens of the nation-states, who are not profit-engineering migrants or who are marked by difference.⁴³

Through an engagement with Glissant's understanding of the ocean and the boat as haunting spaces of becoming, but also the beginning of Relation, we can conceptualize Derridean hospitality otherwise. Born of radical alterity on the Mediterranean, migrant otherness may be the very condition that allows Derridean hyperbolic hospitality to manifest itself. Hyperbolic hospitality challenges a world governed by the conditional law of hospitality

in which oceans become spaces wherein states may abdicate responsibility, all of which we can ground in Derrida's deconstruction of hyperbolic ethics. When referring to hyperbolic ethics as it relates to forgiveness in *Perjury and Pardon, Volume I*, Derrida explains how "hyperbolic ethics [...] would precisely command, on the contrary, that forgiveness be granted where it is neither requested nor deserved, and even for the worst radical evil, forgiveness acquiring its *sense* and possibility as forgiveness only where it is called on to do the im-possible and to forgive the un-forgivable."⁴⁴ This sort of hyperbolic ethic, as it relates to forgiveness, insists on forgiving the unforgivable, for doing the impossible. Understanding the hyperbolic as a commitment to the unconditional and impossible, a hyperbolic hospitality, then, would require the host to accept anyone, regardless of the risk, and do the impossible: permit the stranger to pass the threshold, to live with the Self within their borders and to allow them to remain entirely Other—in doing so, hyperbolic hospitality "re-think[s] what is meant by the possibility of the impossible or the im-possibility of the possible."⁴⁵ Derrida reveals the contradiction that "unconditional hospitality [...] should offer the right of refuge to all immigrants and newcomers. But on the other hand, hospitality must be conditional: there has to be some limitation on rights of residence."⁴⁶ Hyperbolic hospitality insists that the conditional is untenable, and that an unconditional hospitality grounded in hyperbolic ethics is necessary, regardless of the risks. Conceptualizing hyperbolic hospitality, "unconditional hospitality threatens a society that...fragment[s] responsibility," such as those on the Mediterranean's northern shores whose negligence leads to the abdication of the responsibility to migrants' rights to life and living. In its challenge to the abjuration of responsibility to migrant life, this unconditional and hyperbolic ethic of hospitality opens possibilities for a different relationship between Self and Other.⁴⁷

Derrida critiques a hospitality grounded in the power to accept or refuse migrants whose states/hosts deem them either appealing and useful, or unassimilable and undesirable. He attributes this "hostipitality"—a mediation between the host's right to hostility and hospitality, which are never too distant from each other—to a European imperial logic that understands hospitality as both a right to welcome, but also to bar, the Other. In "Derelictions of the Right to Justice," Derrida speaks specifically to the conditions of the *sans-papiers* in France and the "crime of hospitality [délit d'hospitalité]."⁴⁸ Derrida maintains that "there is a word for 'sans-papiers' in each national state culture. In the United States, for example, one uses the term *undocumented* and one organizes and hunts for *illegal immigrants*."⁴⁹ He traces the construction of the "good" versus "bad" foreigner to 1938, when France had "a formal intention to punish severely, henceforth, any foreigner who will have shown himself unworthy [*indigne*] of our hospitality [...] unworthy [*indigne*] of living on our soil."⁵⁰ In his articulation of the French—grounded in broader European imperial and capitalist logics—construction of an ideal immigrant juxtaposed against a migrant "undeserving" of entry into the

nation-state and national community, Derrida deconstructs the ways in which some bodies become marked as undignified, and indeed unworthy or undeserving of hospitality and entry into Europe. The consequence of such logics is the further dehumanization of the migrant, and European self-immunization under the guise of “national interests.”⁵¹ Although Derrida speaks to the experience of the *sans-papiers* specifically, he reveals how “the symptom is universal and it is European, first of all,” wherein migrant precarity is defined by being granted entry only when useful (usually economically) to the nation-state. Xenophobic exclusion and hospitality, then, for Derrida, are always precariously balanced and dialectically intertwined.

Derrida focuses primarily on the *sans-papiers* in his understanding of the European frontier, rising xenophobia and the importance of decriminalizing hospitality in France; yet we can also read him in Lampedusa and other spaces where “the return of nationalisms and fundamentalism [are] in their most bloody manifestation.”⁵² Lampedusa is a space of immense migration and is notorious, like France, for its gestures of hospitality—which turn, quite quickly, into waves of hostility when resources and space are scarce. Like many of the *sans-papiers*, the migrants who travel to Lampedusa brave the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean and find, on the northern shores of the sea, logics (if not laws) that understand hospitality-as-a-crime (which leads to militarized borders), hospitality as the means through which to refuse entry (legal or non-legal) and the tightening of what it means to belong to a national community, have dignity and be a beneficiary of the rights and responsibilities the state provides. Whether in France or Lampedusa, hospitality becomes something that can be extended or revoked at the will of the “master”/host, who always ensures that the migrant—forever marked as foreign—knows who has the power at the threshold of entry.⁵³ And, the responsibility always falls on behalf of this marked migrant to conform, assimilate and work in the interests of the state that accepts them, lest they show any trace of difference or foreignness (which is always inevitable) and prove themselves to be “unworthy” or too “unassimilable” to remain in the community to which they migrated. The same imperial logics of conditional hospitality thus underpin both the case of the *sans-papiers* that Derrida critiques and that of other contemporary migrants in Lampedusa and elsewhere on the Mediterranean’s northern shores.

Indeed, there is an underbelly to Lampedusa’s hospitality toward migrants—the utopian “paradise on earth” very quickly becomes dystopic—one which challenges the current structures of hospitality and renders them unsustainable. Beneath the awards, the public gestures of hospitality and the many concrete ways in which Lampedusa has supported migrants better than their European counterparts (all of which we must acknowledge), some residents also seek to refuse entry and the right to remain. In this sense, the residents of Lampedusa, amid their historical role as dispensers of hos(ti)pitality, “no longer know or no longer want to distinguish between, the

definition of hearth [*un chez-soi*] and hatred or fear of the foreigner – and who no longer know that the heart [*le chez-soi*] of a home, a culture, a society also presupposes a hospitable opening.”⁵⁴ Derrida critiques the ways in which xenophobia and nationalism (or national fraternity) are linked, instead insisting that the home (or homeland) can only be conceptualized through an extension of hospitality—an allowance of the Other to pass through the threshold and into the community of the host. In this sense, he constructs the communal Self as necessarily being defined by a relation (thinking with Glissant) with the Other, rather than as a relation in opposition to the Other.⁵⁵

The power infused into the welcoming extended to migrants and asylum seekers embodies Derrida’s critique of hospitality in *Of Hospitality* and *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. Derrida reveals the hospitality-hostility paradigm and its limits, the power written into gestures of welcoming and the disconnect between the law and an unconditional ethic of hospitality. The ways in which hostility and hospitality are intimately intertwined dwells within what Derrida would refer to as “the culture of the home.” Derrida explores the home as a place

where it is precisely the patron of the house – he who receives, who is master in his house, in his household, in his state, in his nation, in his city, in his town, who remains master in his house – who defines the conditions of hospitality or welcome; where consequently there can be no unconditional welcome, no unconditional passage through the door.⁵⁶

Derrida writes that the law of hospitality is a “self-contradictory concept and experience which can only self-destruct.”⁵⁷ The conditionality of the law of hospitality, the requirement of “being-oneself in one’s own home,” creates a space where the concept of hospitality “needs to protect itself from itself, auto-immunize itself in some way, which is to say, deconstruct itself – precisely – in being put into practice.”⁵⁸ Likewise, the idea that the host carries out gestures of welcoming only in their language is central to Derrida’s understanding of the law of hospitality. The home is where the host welcomes the Other in their “home” language and requires that the Other assimilate themselves and conform to the culture and language of the space into which they are being welcomed. The host holds the power in the host/guest relationship – they have the power to welcome, unconditionally, and in their language. This also means, however, that the host has the power to expel. This is the power that haunts Derridean “hostipitality”: any gesture of hospitality is always haunted by the possibility of hostility.

In his conceptualization of “hostipitality,” Derrida turns to Immanuel Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* by re-reading Kant’s concept of hospitality to make the distinction between hospitality as “right” and as “ethic.” Derrida insists that an ethic of “absolute hospitality should break with the law of hospitality as right or duty,” which is the proposal Kant puts forward.⁵⁹ In contrast to Kantian conceptualizations of hospitality as right, Derrida understands

“ethics [a]s so thoroughly coextensive with the experience of hospitality.”⁶⁰ He insists that “hospitality is culture itself,”⁶¹ which places hospitality at the center of communal identity, self-conceptualization and collective ethics. When Derrida makes hospitality synonymous with culture, he infuses hospitality into the very being, logics and everyday practices of the communities and individuals that extend (or refuse) hospitality and welcome to the Other. Conceptualizing hospitality and culture together means that hospitality is “not simply one ethic amongst others,”⁶² but rather reflects the being, selfhood, principles, and consciousness of a community, individual or state.

The resistance to the unconditional hospitality, which we see in many European spaces, including, though to a far lesser extent, in Lampedusa (which we can also understand, conversely, as a place of migrant refuge), configures hospitality as an obligation that is always concerned with the well-being of the “master” or the host, as Derrida writes. No matter how hospitable a host may seem, conventional ethics of hospitality permit that the host need not be concerned primarily with the well-being or the life of the guest; in doing so, hosts reveal themselves to have a vested interest in maintaining the unequal power dynamic of the extant host-guest paradigm that Derrida explains. These conceptualizations of welcoming and the power of the host fundamentally oppose Derrida’s proposal of the potential for unconditional hospitality as an ethic, which is why he insists that “this Law of hospitality must continue to be thought” and re-thought.⁶³

Hyperbolic hospitality is conceptually a product of deconstruction, because Derrida takes the concept of hospitality to “the limit when he works over a concept up to the point of its turning back toward the enigma that bears it.”⁶⁴ Derrida reveals the “furthest edge of the concept of hospitality” – thus exposing that hospitality has limits as it works within the violent nation-state framework and host-guest paradigm.⁶⁵ A hospitality that requires passports, legal immigration documents and screenings before an offer of welcome is extended is conditional in its scrupulous suspicion, screening and surveillance of all who pass through a community’s borders. Conditional hospitality is bound by rigid conceptualizations of Self and Other – integral to the experience of a nation-state community with rigid borders – and insistences on the right to visit but never the right to remain. The power of the host, and the ways in which the guest must always necessarily accede to the host’s commands and demands – and in their language – reveal the insufficiencies and unsustainability of our current practices of hospitality.

Hyperbolic hospitality, on the other hand, is an unconditional ethic that upends hierarchical dynamics of hospitality and challenges any idea that the threshold/border necessarily belongs to the host (or anyone) in the first place. Hyperbolic hospitality exceeds the current legal order and requires that the guest and host accept each other as they are, learning to live with their mutual otherness, which allows for a more egalitarian encounter between the two –

it insists that hospitality is an equal and reciprocal engagement between host and guest. In its reconfiguration of sovereignty over gestures of welcoming and its refusal of the host's absolute power, hyperbolic hospitality is "the question that comes to us from the other, the foreigner" — that is, it is a gesture and a question that comes "from the place of the other."⁶⁶ The foreigner/migrant is the question of hospitality, thus forcing the Self, the host, or the "master of the house" to confront that from which they cannot look away — the question of foreignness and ethics itself. By positioning the question of hospitality as arriving from the foreigner or migrant, hyperbolic hospitality takes the power away from the "master" or "host" by insisting that hospitality is a reciprocal process by which the host and the guest (or the Self and the Other) engage in welcoming practices of give and take grounded in mutual obligation. Derrida provokes that hospitality "originally belong[s] to neither host nor guest, but to the gesture by which one of them welcomes the other — even and above all if he is himself without a dwelling from which this welcome could be conceived."⁶⁷ Hyperbolic hospitality may be (or seem) impossible, but it is the hyperbolic gesture — the giving without anything to give, understanding that both the host and the guest are responsible for, if necessary, giving up everything known — that defines Derrida's proposal for a hyperbolic ethics of hospitality and calls us to think hospitality anew.

This offer, this pact, this agreement of hyperbolic hospitality must extend to any Other. It must be made available to anyone and everyone — which is always impossible — or hyperbolic hospitality will not be worthy of its name.

Derrida criticizes the ways in which capitalist nation-states only accept migrants who provide them with economic benefit and only allow them to remain so long as they continue to fuel the economy of the host. Hyperbolic hospitality, on the other hand, does not require the "stranger" or migrant to provide or produce; it is an ethic that allows the Other to live, regardless of productivity. Derrida insists that in this unconditional hospitality, there is "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 of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names."⁶⁸ The only required reciprocity between Self and Other in a world defined by hyperbolic hospitality is the allowance of both to remain and continue to live as they are. As such, cohabitation would require a break from any (economic, political, social, linguistic, cultural, and so on) expectation — the hyperbolic means one must take a chance on the possibility that the Other will neither produce, contribute nor change, but that they still deserve to live well and safely. Hyperbolic hospitality thus destroys any attempt at linking capitalist impulses with hospitality and the link between citizenship, birth and belonging by insisting that the "right [to live be] granted to the foreigner as such."⁶⁹

In contrast to the ways in which nation-states and national communities extend hospitality, which is always intimately related to the possibility of

hostility, hyperbolic hospitality requires a willingness of the host to give itself over to the guest without the promise that the Other will transcend their foreignness. It is an immense risk to offer everything to the unknown Other and take a chance on such a hospitality. Like a Derridean gift,⁷⁰ once unconditional hospitality is extended, it cannot be revoked—the Other must necessarily take on some power the host previously possessed. In doing so, hyperbolic hospitality threatens a world wherein the nation-state, and particularly the European nation-state, has absolute power over those migrants who reach their shores. Thinking with Derrida means hyperbolic hospitality can be conceptualized as containing within it two suppositions: that one does not refuse and attempt to curb any entry, nor aim to make temporary the settlement of the Other in a space—in other words, one extends an “unquestioning welcome.”⁷¹ Once entrance and settlement are permitted and granted, the Other may remain Other, forever. There can be no attempt at or requirement of assimilation if hospitality is to be hyperbolic. Regardless of whether they will be assimilable citizens in the eyes of the nation-state, hyperbolic hospitality allows for an unconditional and unrestricted right to residence and the right to live as full community members. As such, the guest becomes part of the communal self—in spite of and because of their otherness—and may thereby take on the role of host (or perhaps dissolve the idea of “host” and “guest” in the first place).

Hyperbolic hospitality allows the Other—once integrated into the community—to live as such, without any attempt at transcending difference or assimilating them into the national Self. In many ways, this conceptualization of hyperbolic hospitality refracts Derrida’s deconstruction of justice and Glissant’s writing of Relation—both of which these thinkers conceptualize as a process by which the Other may remain Other, despite continued encounters with the Self. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant describes Relation as a phenomenon wherein the “thought of self and thought of other here become obsolete in their duality. Every Other is a citizen and no longer a barbarian. What is here is open, as much as this there.”⁷² In other words, through Relation, and the opacity that enables it, there is no attempt to transcend difference, to require absolute transparency or to mold the Other in the image of the Self.⁷³ Hyperbolic hospitality is thus a process by which encounter is perpetual without any attempt to conceal or transcend real or seeming alterity; in this sense, “the foreigner [may remain] a foreigner.”⁷⁴ According to this ethic, assimilation is no longer the norm nor the ideal; every community that extends hospitality unconditionally must be willing to live (and live well) with difference. Hyperbolic hospitality is a process that produces a new form of cohabitation that allows for every member of the community to have equal rights and responsibilities to each other, despite their otherness. Otherness becomes neither the basis for exclusion nor of abjection.

In Derrida's thought, hyperbolic hospitality must necessarily exceed our current institutions—national and international. As Derrida deconstructs cosmopolitanism—a concept intimately related to hospitality—he engages Hannah Arendt's writings on birth, naturalization and citizenship. Following Arendt, Derrida wonders: “[H]ow can the right to asylum be redefined and developed without repatriation and without naturalisation?”⁷⁵ He insists that there is no “hope for cities exercising hospitality if we recognize with Arendt, as I feel we must, that nowadays international law is limited by treaties between sovereign states, and that not even a ‘government of the world’ would be capable of sorting things out.”⁷⁶ Derrida understands current institutions, configurations of sovereignty and international law to be incapable of producing the modes of cohabitation and gestures of hospitality required to live with the Other. Therefore, he urges that we “make an audacious call for a genuine innovation in the history of the right of asylum or the duty to hospitality,” thereby demanding that societies open themselves to the possibility of a hyperbolic ethic of hospitality grounded in values of radical solidarity and absolute welcoming, regardless of the risks.⁷⁷

Unconditional hospitality seems unsustainable—if not impossible—because it is a hospitality of the not-yet, a hospitality-to-come (*l'avenir*⁷⁸). It challenges the ways in which we organize institutions and conceptualizations of Self and Other. In the Mediterranean, a hospitality of the not-yet world requires an understanding that, though on an ethereal plane, coastal states have a responsibility to the lives of the migrants who cross the water. This responsibility cannot manifest in increased militarization or policing but must rather ground itself in a commitment to the universal right to live. Likewise, on land, Derrida does “not [imagine...] the European Community as it now exists or is taking shape in its current (neoliberal) majority, virtually threatened by so many internal wars...but of a Europe to come, a Europe trying to find itself.”⁷⁹ This is a necessary responsibility, Derrida charges, if we are to conceptualize the possibility of hyperbolic hospitality and living (well) with the Other. We must create new ways to relate to each other and the Other to remake the political sphere into one less insistent on rigidity, difference and exclusive responsibility to those we perceive as the “same as us.” This radical and new form of politics and solidarity accords with Derrida's conceptualization of justice, which he articulates as “heterogeneous to the law to which it is yet so close, from which in truth it is indissociable”⁸⁰—hyperbolic hospitality cannot be translated into legal language and thus must necessarily exceed national boundaries and international institutions that seek to militarize borders and construct obligations to and rights for citizenry as exclusive. To create a world of hyperbolic hospitality is to refute the carceral logic of the “rights” of nation-states and individuals that Kant crafted in his theorization of hospitality and instead embrace a new means through which to relate to the Other.⁸¹

In some ways, the practices which we see in Lampedusa outside of the protests begin to represent a sort of Europe-to-come, as the residents and government welcome and extend gestures of hospitality not present in most European border regions, despite limited resources and space. Yet, they also remind us of the limits of hospitality through institutions that seek to police migrants, militarize borders and ensure first and foremost the security of its citizenry. In other words, although Lampedusa represents a picture of a hospitality that exceeds that of mainland European states it remains conditional.

Derrida calls for the creation of a new politics, grounded in a hyperbolic ethic of hospitality. By refusing institutions and current configurations of sovereignty and the nation-state, Derrida shows how “the fight must be global, European, national, and local at the same time” in order to construct an ethic of hyperbolic hospitality.⁸² By tying hospitality to ethics and justice, Derrida insists that we reconceptualize hospitality and difference in order to craft a world that is “both thoughtful and generous.”⁸³ In this new world, there may be “a politics that will clear the current laws of their shame and infamy—a politics of the foreigner, a right of foreigners that will not be a dereliction of justice,” which again takes on a Glissantian overtone in its insistence on relating to the Self and Other otherwise.⁸⁴ It is only through this hyperbolic hospitality, one which radically shifts the ways in which Self and Other are conceived and welcomed, that “we can finally live, speak, and breathe,” and “be able to discover a taste for living in a culture, a language, and a country” in which hospitality, justice and a hyperbolic ethic may be achieved.⁸⁵ Because hyperbolic ethics are always reaching for the impossible, the question remains whether hyperbolic hospitality is in the realm of the plausible.

What would a hyperbolic hospitality look like in the Mediterranean, and Lampedusa in particular? What would it mean for this island in the northern Mediterranean to accept, a priori, all migrants who seek either to pass through or remain there, for good? Living within and through a hyperbolic ethic of hospitality, there would be no attempt to transcend difference, but rather an openness to live with the Other, and live well, regardless of the risk. Is it tenable, in Lampedusa and other spaces wherein hospitality is tested to its limit today, to engage a hyperbolic ethic of hospitality? Is it possible not only to welcome, but to (learn to) live well with the Other? These are the possibilities hyperbolic hospitality provides.

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- ¹ In cases such as the “left-to-die boat” in 2011. See: Heller, Charles & Lorenzo Pezzani, “The Left-to-die Boat.” *Forensic Architecture*. November 4, 2012: <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-left-to-die-boat>.
- ² Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: An Interview with Jean Birnbaum*, Jean Birnbaum (ed) (New York, NY: Melville House, 2007), 25.
- ³ In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida articulates how “the one who is writing, always by hand, even when using machines, holds out his hand like a blind man seeking to touch the one whom he could thank for the gift of a language, for the very words in which he declares himself ready to give thanks. And to beg for mercy as well” (64). Like the gift of language, the gift of hyperbolic hospitality is something for which the guest and the host must reach, blindly, with the faith—hope—that they may be able to create unconditional spaces of cohabitation defined by gestures of hospitality and integration that allow the Self and Other to live as such, together. See: Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- ⁴ In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida insists that “to live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death” (*Specters of Marx*, xvii). In other words, the goal is not to learn to live (from the Other), for that is impossible. Derrida argues that “living, like dying, is not something one learns. All one can really do is see it coming. Together. To try to learn from one another to live, in a shared anxiety and a difficult freedom, where each expects him or herself to die: a passing out of life, farewell [salut] in the night” (*Learning to Live Finally* 14). We learn to live through an encounter with the Other. As this relates to hospitality, therefore, a crucial objective is not to learn directly from the host or the guest, but rather to be given the security or the space to learn to live for/as oneself, if that is even possible—to be given the space to learn to live (well). It is an impossibility that hospitality attempts to make possible—it is the opportunity that hyperbolic hospitality provides. See: Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York, NY: Routledge 2006), xvii.
- ⁵ Jacques Derrida & Rottenberg, Elizabeth, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 140.
- ⁶ ANSA, “Lampedusa Mayor Collects Award for Welcoming Migrants,” *Info Migrants*, October 31, 2023, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/52935/lampedusa-mayor-collects-award-for-welcoming-migrants>; Julia Dumont, “Two years of anti-immigrant policy in Giorgia Meloni’s Italy,” *Info Migrants*, October 24, 2024, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/60758/two-years-of-antiimmigrant-policy-in-giorgia-melonis-italy>; Laura Dubois and Amy Kazmin, “Meloni hits out at EU top court after migration ruling,” *Financial Times*, August 1, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/13f81ef5-767f-4e99-a1dc-46207dcd3423>.
- ⁷ Already, with this invocation of “paradise,” we should read the search for a sort of utopian imaginary or narrative that Lampedusa has become a utopia wherein migrants and citizens alike can live in peace and share in community. Yet, Derrida would remind us that “the madness of political utopia [has] done enough harm in the twentieth century for us to beware of it in future!” (*Of Hospitality*, 70). Likewise, we must always keep in mind that the line between utopia and dystopia is never far off and we should be wary of such invocations. Written into the utopian is the insistence on erasing or denying that which does not fit the narrative which, in the case of migration to Lampedusa, includes the very real ways in which migrants are left to die (left-to-die) in the Mediterranean and on its shores.

- ⁸ ANSA, “Lampedusa Mayor Collects Award for Welcoming Migrants.”
- ⁹ Ruth Sherlock, “On Lampedusa, there’s sympathy for migrants — as long as they don’t stay,” *NPR*, September 28, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/28/1201785102/lampedusa-italy-migrant-crisis-meloni>.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Charles Heller & Lorenzo Pezzani, “Forensic Oceanography: Investigating the Deaths of Migrants at the EU’s Maritime Frontier,” In Nicholas De Genova, *The Borders of “Europe”: Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering* (Durham: Duke University Press 2017), 100.
- ¹³ Sherlock, “On Lampedusa, there’s sympathy for migrants — as long as they don’t stay.”
- ¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London, UK: Routledge, 2001), 13.
- ¹⁵ Derrida, *Negotiations*, 134.
- ¹⁶ Heller & Pezzani, “Forensic Oceanography,” 101.
- ¹⁷ Heller & Pezzani, “Forensic Oceanography,” 90.
- ¹⁸ Heller & Pezzani, “Forensic Oceanography,” 95.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Heller & Pezzani, “Forensic Oceanography,” 91.
- ²³ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 5.
- ²⁴ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, J. Michael Dash (trans.) (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 14.
- ²⁷ Rinaldo Walcott, “The Black Aquatic,” *Liquid Blackness* (2021): 63-72, 65.
- ²⁸ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 7.
- ²⁹ See: Isabel Hofmeyr “The Complicating Sea: The Indian Ocean as Method.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. 1 December 2012, 584-590.
- ³⁰ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.
- ³¹ Jacques Derrida & Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 4.
- ³² Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012), 124.
- ³³ See: Chelsea Schields, *Offshore Attachments: Oil and Intimacy in the Caribbean* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023).
- ³⁴ Heller & Pezzani, “Forensic Oceanography,” 89.
- ³⁵ Heller & Pezzani, “Forensic Oceanography,” 101.

- ³⁶ Heller & Pezzani, "Forensic Oceanography," 89.
- ³⁷ Heller & Pezzani, "Forensic Oceanography," 104.
- ³⁸ Sam Okoth Opondo and Michael J. Shapiro, *Passages: On Geo-Analysis and the Aesthetics of Precarity*, art by Barbara Benish and Enrique Martinez Leal (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2024), 125.
- ³⁹ Heller & Pezzani, "Forensic Oceanography," 104, 96.
- ⁴⁰ Heller & Pezzani, "Forensic Oceanography," 96.
- ⁴¹ Heller & Pezzani, "Forensic Oceanography," 89.
- ⁴² Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality," Barry Stocker and Forbes Morlock (trans.), *Angelaki* 5, 3 (2000): 3-18.
- ⁴³ Heller & Pezzani, "Forensic Oceanography," 90.
- ⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Perjury and Pardon, Volume I* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2022), 14.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, x.
- ⁴⁷ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 64.
- ⁴⁸ Derrida, *Negotiations*, 133.
- ⁴⁹ Derrida, *Negotiations*, 140.
- ⁵⁰ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 138.
- ⁵¹ Derrida, *Negotiations*, 137
- ⁵² Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 60.
- ⁵³ Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 17.
- ⁵⁴ Derrida, *Negotiations*, 134.
- ⁵⁵ See: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, England: Verso Books, 2016).
- ⁵⁶ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 4.
- ⁵⁷ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 5.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 25.
- ⁶⁰ Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 17.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² Ibid.
- ⁶³ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 60.
- ⁶⁴ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 8.
- ⁶⁵ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 46.
- ⁶⁶ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 68.

- ⁶⁷ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 62.
- ⁶⁸ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 25.
- ⁶⁹ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 21.
- ⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, David Wills (trans.) (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
- ⁷¹ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 29.
- ⁷² Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.
- ⁷³ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 193.
- ⁷⁴ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 23.
- ⁷⁵ Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 7.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷⁷ Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 4.
- ⁷⁸ See: *Derrida*, directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman (2002; New York: Zeitgeist Films).
- ⁷⁹ Derrida, *Learning to Live, Finally*, 41.
- ⁸⁰ Derrida, *Negotiations*, 24.
- ⁸¹ Derrida writes the lineage of carcerality and policing of the private sphere to Kant's refusal of the right to lie and eradication of any form of privacy. In doing so, he reimagines the connection between the nation-state, the breaching of the private sphere and hospitality to read hospitality and Kant otherwise. See: Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 69.
- ⁸² Derrida, *Negotiations*, 142.
- ⁸³ Derrida, *Negotiations*, 144.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid.