

Hospitality in a Time of Terror: Strangers at the Gate

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176 pages, 2017, USD \$80.50 (hardcover)

Bucknell University Press

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“[T]he very act of immunizing against a foreign virus is to inject a small measure of that virus into the body—we are protected not from that incorporation but *by* it, and only able to avoid the destruction by that foreign agent because a trace of it remains inside of us.” (Balfour, 2017, 103)

Hospitality in a Time of Terror is a prescient read in the context of a global pandemic. Balfour’s grappling with the generatively slippery paradigm of hospitality, as with 2021’s *Hospitalities: Transitions and Transgression, North and South* (ed. Merle Williams), is welcome. Balfour proceeds from the premise that “hospitality ... is both in crisis and at a crossroad” (xxi). She considers how and why hospitality might bridge the materiality of biopolitics, via discourses of immunology and virology, and a host of cultural texts, from architecture to film, through literature and street art.

When establishing her conceptual scaffold, Balfour draws on the usual philosophical suspects: Derrida, Kant and Levinas. This speaks to a central critique of the book, which can be seen as a backhanded compliment. Coming in just shy of 180 pages, this is a slim volume. While this enables Balfour to offer some compelling case studies, it also left me wanting more. The book suggests it could and should give this to realize its considerable potential. If the Kant/Levinas/Derrida touchstones are effectively deployed when Balfour gets into fine close readings of everything from Central Park’s gates to *Falling Man*, the list of works cited could have demonstrated greater range, richness, and relevance. This would have consolidated some of her central arguments more powerfully. While figures such as Lefebvre (83) and Kristeva (111) do appear, such as in the illuminating analysis of incorporation in DeLillo (108), I was struck by the absence of sustained discussion of figures such as Sara Ahmed, Rosi Braidotti and Achille Mbembe.

The politics and/or poetics behind Balfour’s selection of texts and/as sites to focus on in her four central chapters are intriguing. If I felt this could have been addressed more explicitly, I commend her early ability to map out hospitality-as-paradigm in helpfully spatial terms. As questions about the relationship between hospitality and archives simmer throughout, Balfour bounds her definitively post-9/11 discussion using Central Park as chronotope. For those grappling with it in the Covid era, the parallels remain powerful:

[T]he gate offers the image and impasse of a perpetual threshold, at once cultural, temporal, institutional, and methodological ... *Stranger’s Gate* speaks to a deep preoccupation with a philosophy of hospitality and living

with others. It is a preoccupation that seems more relevant than ever and in need of comprehensive and timely reflection as its aporias have become greater and its contradictions all the more devastating. (xiii)

If Balfour is attentive to the aporias of hospitality as paradigm and praxis, these slips also pepper her study. As she interrogates the sense that “if hospitality as we understand it is failing, its deployment has never been more necessary or more in jeopardy” (xxii), the geopolitical sphere of reference and focus on an overwhelmingly monochrome series of cultural producers raises questions about who the pronoun ‘we’ actually welcomes. A brief consideration of Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (119) as *Falling Man* counterpoint does little to offset the Anglo-American orientation. Be it in her selection of primary or more conceptual material, Balfour’s range and reach could have been more capacious. This was captured in the first chapter on “guests and ghosts.” Following on from an earlier allusion to Judith Butler’s reflections on the necropolitics of precarious life (xxv), the absence of Teju Cole’s *Open City* was disconcerting, as inclusion of the latter would have substantially enriched Balfour’s discussion of eighteenth-century African American burial grounds (7).

Only in the final pages of the book does its overarching structure become clear. The exploration of dust, debris and detritus through the more expansive conceptual lenses of remainders, reminders, and remnants in an insightful consideration of incorporation in DeLillo, for instance, recalls the first substantive museum chapter. It is to Balfour’s credit that—as with the book as a whole—individual sections develop in richness and persuasiveness, exemplified in her discussion of the intersections between genealogies, spectrality and hospitality: “these ghosts have been there all along, long before the towers fell and in the historical hauntings of American imperialism and violence. That is, the specter of hospitality existed long before the terrorist attacks but is one that the aftermath of the attacks makes all the more noticeable” (20). As such reflections provide the foundation for a fuller consideration of the ethical necessity of being hospitable to the absent presences of various spectres, it also invites the reader to be attentive to the unsaid and invisible in Balfour’s study.

An innovative feature of *Hospitality in a Time of Terror* is its exploration of the relationship between source materials and form. The book moves from an exploration of museums in chapter 1 to film in chapter 2 (*Zero Dark Thirty*) to East End London street art in chapter 3, before concluding with a discussion of literature in chapter 4. If connections across *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Falling Man* are quite apparent, new ways of framing both texts emerge when exploring them through the spatial and urban art perspectives foregrounded in the first and third chapters respectively. That Balfour navigates this range of material, demonstrating a sensitivity to their respective contexts of production and circulation, using the often overlooked fundamentals of forensic reading, is to her credit. As she admits in chapter two, her focus on *Zero Dark Thirty* is a provocation, designed to anchor her larger argument that “hospitality often exceeds the containers of narrative and understanding that seek to delimit its possibility ... we

are forced to remember that hospitality never promises safety, nor does it guarantee freedom from violence, making [the film] a text preoccupied with a hospitality that arrives precisely through violence” (30). Throughout the book, Balfour invites her reader to take a critical stance rather than remain in the safety of their own indifference. Balfour argues that “[to] respond to the film as simply a justification of violent interrogation ... is to miss what is operating alongside the violence, that is, a sense of desire that is made far more complicated by the shame cast upon it by that which it recalls in real life” (39). If this speaks to the text’s power, it also once again flags some of its limitations. For all the necessary contextualization of the film in relation to the prisoner abuse scandals at Abu Ghraib and beyond, I was struck by the absence of sustained engagement with the voluminous discourse on war porn/torture *et al.* The final manuscript also required a more rigorous proofread, peppered as it is with unfortunate typographical slips.

While this is a slim monograph, its ambition is commendable. Particular highlights include the discussion of urban street art, alongside the integration of images, in which spaces, places and sites contest hegemonic, xenophobically populist narratives. As it pivots back to earlier considerations of Derrida, this chapter encapsulates much that is penetrating and productive in Balfour’s work: “street art becomes a unique and compelling test ground upon which to interrogate both the political and ethical possibilities of hospitality” (72). This in turn anticipates an exploration of “mobile hospitality” in the context of increased migration in the face of globalization and other forces (86). Once more, this might have gone further.

Balfour compels us to grapple with the realization that “[c]ultural production—the films, literature, art, and public institutions created in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks—provides us with new ways of apprehending the complexities of thinking through the concept of hospitality that are not entirely unrelated but promisingly untethered from strictly political or philosophical understanding” (xx). This early assertion foreshadows a host of provocative questions that the book’s conclusion raises: “Where are we now then? Which edge are we up against—the one that limits and prevents welcoming strangers, or the one that serves as a tipping point, the threshold where we might finally ‘give place’ to the other?” (134). Making a notable contribution to the burgeoning discourse on hospitality as paradigm and praxis, *Hospitality in a Time of Terror* is a welcome and stimulating addition to this field of inquiry.

Works Cited

Williams, Merle A. (ed). *Hospitalities: Transitions and Transgression, North and South*. Routledge India, 2020.