

## My Neighbor's Face and Similar Vulgarities

Naida Zukić

If there is pure hospitality, or a pure gift, it should consist in this opening  
without horizon, without horizon of expectation, an opening  
to the newcomer whoever that may be.  
Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice, and Responsibility" 70.

Derrida's examination of unconditional hospitality belongs to a discourse demanding that hospitality be extended without anticipation, prejudice, or identification to an unexpected visitor, foreigner, guest, immigrant, or stranger. This *absolute* openness to the newcomer on the principles of the heart, however, involves ethical risks and limitations inherent in the neighbor. Žižek locates the neighbor in its violent brutality over against Freud's traumatic intruder (a thing that hystericizes us and disturbs the balance of our way of life). The presupposition to be resisted here, Žižek warns, is the ethical gentrification of the neighbor, "the reduction of the radically ambiguous monstrosity of the Neighbor-Thing into an Other as the abyssal point from which the call of ethical responsibility emanates" ("Neighbors" 163). That one must be radical in offering hospitality to the other stems from Derrida's belief in overcoming violence and exclusion via pure openness and unconditional hospitality toward the Other. I am opposed to this Derridean notion of ethical hospitality.

Crucial here, however, is an ideological shift from *a neighbor* in the simple sense, to *the neighbor* in its radical otherness. The neighbor in its radical otherness disturbs; the neighbor "remains an inert, impenetrable, enigmatic presence that hystericizes" (Žižek, "Neighbors" 140-1). Therefore, my meditation on the figure of the neighbor is a corrective move

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against unconditional hospitality that accentuates the limitation of ethical universality. This logic is implied in the critique of Derrida's "opening without horizon," and contextualized in representations of the Bosnian genocide in Peter Maass's *Love Thy Neighbor*.<sup>1</sup> Ethnic cleansing, neighbor-on-neighbor violence, and dehumanization of the Other read as the portrayal of humankind at its worst. Complicating Derrida's notion of ethical hospitality are narratives of mass atrocities within which lurks the neighbor the unfathomable abyss, the radical otherness in all its intensity and inaccessibility.

### **Against the Ethics of Unconditional Hospitality**

An act of hospitality can only be poetic.  
Derrida<sup>2</sup>

Stories orbiting the questions of ethics, violence, and the Bosnian war have faded from our public consciousness. Today, Bosnian political developments and survivors' accounts of the atrocities receive occasional press coverage, largely through reporting about war crimes trials at The Hague (i.e., Slobodan Milošević and Radovan Karadžić's trials for war crimes during the wars in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Croatia). At the most basic level such questions about war and religious conflict highlight a revived sense of urgency within the context of ethics and violence. Furthermore, breakdowns of economic and familial structures, systemic violence, and human rights violations reflect a distinct scene shift that characterizes modern wars; a politico/ideological move from inter to intra-national conflict.

Chaos, violence, and death that ensued in Bosnia in 1992 add to the complexity of intra-national conflicts, and more specifically highlight the atrociously orchestrated neighbor-to-neighbor violence. These systemic implementations of violence are never ahistorical or abstract, but always

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Maass, a war correspondent from Bosnia, offers a disturbing portrayal of neighbor-to-neighbor violence in Bosnia in 1992. In *Love Thy Neighbor*, Maass details the horrors of war witnessed and perpetrated by Bosnian Serbs and Muslims—friends and neighbors caught up in one of the gravest atrocities in Modern Europe since World War II.

<sup>2</sup> quoted in Anne Dufourmantelle, "Invitation." in *Of Hospitality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 2.

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already part of concrete intersubjective, political, and ideological contexts within which they are mobilized. It is in this light that I revisit Derrida's notion of ethical hospitality – the ideology that teaches us not to objectify the Other – and the vulgarity of Slobodan Milošević and Radovan Karadžić, the traumatic intruders, the neighbors.

Derrida's incalculable hospitality, the opening without horizon of expectation to the newcomer whoever that may be, is an aporia at best and an impossible demand at worst. Conditional hospitality is inscribed in the very possibility of unconditional hospitality and the opening to the "absolute arrivant," the foreigner. He elaborates upon this newcomer who is not even a guest, who:

surprises the host – who is not yet a host or an inviting power – enough to call into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity, beginning with the very border that delineated a legitimate home and assured lineage, names and language, nations, families and genealogies. The absolute arrivant does not yet have a name or an identity. (*Aporias* 34)

It is precisely Derrida's unconditional hospitality which remains *conditioned* by the histories, languages, and "the conditional laws of the right to hospitality," imposed on the newcomer (*On Cosmopolitanism* 22). The possibility of impossible hospitality is therefore, purely theoretical and conceptual; conditioned by political inequalities, economic exploitation, injustice, war, homophobia, xenophobia, racism, and so on. Accordingly, the absolute *arrivant* without a name or identity, the foreigner, can always violate and extinguish these laws of hospitality. Within the unconditional hospitality to otherness, inscribed in the element of the foreigner are the unpredictable violent "visitations" that demonstrate the limit to incalculable hospitality. Although unconditional hospitality and exposure to the other requires the suspension of all discrimination, there is always a possibility that the foreigner will be the enemy of the host. Because such possibility exists, unconditional hospitality remains merely conceptual; it is impossible to require that the host not decide who does or does not enter the house. Unconditional hospitality is, therefore, a self-contradictory concept; it deconstructs itself precisely by being put into practice ("Hospitality" 8).

Unconditional hospitality requires a host to open the door to a foreigner who might bring harm. This aporia of hospitality is necessarily political. The laws of political (conditional and exclusive) hospitality refer

to the cultural and ideological structures, which preexist the subject, and interrogate the event of the contact with the other, the foreigner, the stranger. The premise of unconditional hospitality, however, is that the neighbor, someone whom I know from within, cannot be my enemy.

Nevertheless, gross violations of hospitality, including massive atrocities and human rights abuses are occurring not between strangers, but between neighbors.<sup>3</sup> The neighbor is one such figure of the Other toward whom my relationship is that of familiarity, common language, and proximity. Underlying Derrida's unconditional hospitality is fear of the Other—the fear of the unfathomable abyss of radical otherness that transgresses, compromises, and disturbs from within. The neighbor.

### **Fear Thy Neighbor**

What's the moral difference between slitting a man's throat  
or slicing off his balls?  
Maass 51

To recognize the Other is thus not primarily or ultimately to recognize  
the Other in a certain well-defined capacity ("I recognize you  
as...rational, good, lovable"), but to recognize you in the  
abyss of your very impenetrability and opacity.  
Žižek, "Neighbors" 138-9

Once part of the Yugoslavian Federation, Bosnia gained its sovereignty in 1992 at which point political opportunists began using nationalism as a lever to gain power, promoting neighbor-on-neighbor violence and ethnic cleansing. Slobodan Milošević, former Yugoslavian President, further ignited nationalist sparks in Bosnia by calling Serbs to arms and propagating divisions among the people of Bosnia. While my overarching goal is to reveal ethical and political complexities of the figure of the neighbor, I particularly want to confront the limitation of unconditional hospitality in its genocide-driven-ethics.

In his journalistic accounts of Bosnian conflict Peter Maass describes learning about Omarska camp survivors, and, particularly about one Muslim man who describes being ordered by his jailers to castrate three

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<sup>3</sup>Even a cursory review of literature on human rights violations attributes the gravest crimes against humanity to be occurring between neighbors with mutual vulnerabilities and territories—Bosnia, Rwanda, Georgia, Sudan, to name a few.

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prisoners during his detention in Omarska: “They forced me to tear off their testicles, with my teeth, so I tore off their testicles with my teeth? They were screaming with pain” (50).

this is the *neighbor*.

Bosnians who survived Serbian run death camps and reached safety in Croatia had given some of the most chilling and unimaginable testimonies about their experiences of torture carried on by camp guards, their immediate neighbors:

The witness stated that a young Muslim man from Kozarac who had owned a Suzuki motorcycle was tortured in front of the other prisoners. He was severely beaten all over his body and his teeth were knocked out. The guards then tied one end of a wire tightly around his testicles and tied the other end to the victim’s motorcycle. A guard got on the motorcycle and sped off (Maass 50).

*This is the neighbor.*

Unexpected brutality of a high school teacher turned slaughterer. A camp guard with a cynical smile. Omarska torturer. Beneath the image of the neighbor as a teacher, a doctor, a priest, and a mirror image of me, there always lurks the neighbor in its radical otherness, demystified, in all his vulgarity, brutality, and violence; the neighbor as the “bearer of monstrous otherness” (Žižek, “Neighbors” 162).

Maass describes his coverage of the Bosnian war as a “freak show,” and a world so horrid and obscene that it would sicken Edgar Allan Poe (51). Maass writes about a farmer named Adem who sat in the corner of a sports hall that smelled like livestock; the smell of sweat and filth was coming from Bosnian refugees, he describes, who were *living* on blankets, and on the bleacher seats, who had not yet had a chance to wash their bodies. Only few weeks before, some of these people had been well-groomed lawyers, doctors, and college deans, “but now they smelled like livestock. It was only the smallest insult the war had bestowed on them” (4). Speaking in a whispered mumble, Adem told the story about the night when thirty-five men from his village were rounded up by Serbs from a neighboring village and had their throats slit:

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They were killed by Serbs who had been their friends, people who had helped harvest their field the previous autumn, people with whom they shared adolescent adventures and secrets, skinny-dipping in the Drina River on hot summer days. ... All of a sudden, seemingly without reason, they had turned into killers (6).

*THIS* is the neighbor

Adem and a few other men fled to the forest around their village. The Serbs chased after them shouting: "Muslim scum, hah, we'll get you tomorrow. We've got your women for tonight. We're going to fuck them real good. Did you hear that? *We're going to fuck them real good tonight!*" (Maass 6).

*this* is the neighbor

Maass doubts the credibility and reliability of these unimaginable, atrocious stories of death, rape, and thuggery, as when he was approached by a teenage girl who explained to him how one of the Muslim men in her village "had been nailed to the front door of the mosque, his arms spread out, so that he was like Christ on the cross, and he was still alive at the time" (7).

**this is the neighbor**

The girl witnessed this horror as she and other women from the village were herded toward train stations where they were loaded into cattle cars, and expunged from their country. The pretty girls were taken off the cars and raped. She was not one of them, she said.

This is the **neighbor**.

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## Neighbor Love/Face as Monstrous Otherness

If surrealism had not existed, Bosnia would have invented it.  
Maass 29

The ‘wall of language’ which forever separates  
me from the abyss of another subject is simultaneously  
that which opens up and sustains this abyss - the very obstacle  
that separates me from the Beyond is what creates its mirage.  
Žižek, *Violence* 73

In positioning the neighbor as the monstrous other, Žižek reads the neighbor against Lacanian structures of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and the Real. More specifically, Žižek distinguishes between Imaginary others, which are our mirror-like relationships of mutual recognition; The Symbolic Big Other, which is “the impersonal set of rules that coordinate our coexistence”, and finally, The Other qua Real, which is “the impossible Thing, the ‘inhuman partner,’ the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic Order, is possible” (“Neighbors” 143). To understand the radical Otherness inscribed in the element of the neighbor it is crucial to understand how these three Lacanian dimensions are connected. For Žižek, the neighbor as the Thing means that, “beneath the neighbor as my *semblant*, my mirror image, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that cannot be gentrified”(ibid). Žižek designates the figure of the neighbor as the ultimate object of desire in its intensity and impenetrability the neighbor that disturbs, tortures, and is always too close. Importantly, between the Imaginary Other and the Impenetrable Real Other must step in the Symbolic Other that gentrifies their chaotic dimensions:

In order to render our coexistence with the Thing minimally bearable, the symbolic order qua Third, the pacifying mediator, has to intervene: the “gentrification” of the Other-Thing into a “normal human fellow” cannot occur through our direct interaction, but presupposes the third agency to which we both submit ourselves there is no intersubjectivity (no symmetrical, shared, relation between humans) without the impersonal symbolic Order (“Neighbors” 143-4).

The neighbor is fittingly given a more unsettling dimension as the impenetrable Other, the enemy whose radical ambiguity and traumatic

character do not prepare the ground for a possibility of an authentic encounter. Consequently, the impossibility of such encounters brings about the alienation of social life, which is woven into the practices, rituals, and social texture of everyday life:

Even if I live side by side with others, in my normal state I ignore them. I am allowed not to get too close to others. I move in a social space where I interact with others obeying certain external “mechanical” rules, without sharing their inner world (Žižek, *Violence* 59).

“Sometimes alienation is not a problem, but a solution,” indispensable for peaceful coexistence (ibid).

Brutality feels at home in Višegrad, and the ethnic cleansing of this city was an ordinary affair, writes Maass. “Bosnia makes you question basic assumptions about humanity, and one of the questions concerns torture. Why after all should there be any limit?” (51). At the beginning of the war, paramilitary Serb forces came to town, rounded up unarmed Muslim men, and loaded them into refrigerated meat trucks. An older Muslim man who was forced to push the corpses into the river managed to escape, and later gave his testimony. The Serbs took these men to the railing of the Višegrad bridge, the man confessed, forcing them to lean forward, at which point they would either slit their throats or shoot them. They threw them all into the river. ...

They ordered me and a man who was even older than me to walk toward the bridge. We came across the body of an old man with a mutilated head. They ordered us to drag him toward the bridge. As we were dragging the old one, his skull was falling open and the brain came out. We dragged the body to the bridge and they ordered us to throw it into Drina. There were two more bodies on the bridge. They had their throats cut. We were ordered to throw them into the river as well. On one of the bodies, four fingers on the left hand were freshly cut off (9).

### This is the neighbor

When confronted with neighbor-on-neighbor violence whom do I save? The neighbor? Myself? Who do I attack? If I attack, am I just another neighbor? As a journalist, Peter Maass is not supposed to get involved in the events he covers, so he stands aside and watches a man on the verge of execution because it is a prudent thing to do. Is this much different from the “Serbs who prudently kept quiet as their Bosnian



neighbors were shot or packed off to prison camps?” (21). A tragically misplaced ethical conviction? Perhaps. What about brutal acts of torture about which we know but choose to ignore? The atrocious reality of the death camps, tortures, and mass executions does not reside in the immediate reality of the violence, but in Maass’s blindness to this accumulated atrocity—the fetishist disavowal (i.e., *how* this violent event appears to him, not the violent event itself). In an act that suspends symbolic efficiency of witnessing torture and suffering, the watcher relies on a gesture of fetishist disavowal: “I know, but I don’t want to know that I know, so I don’t know. I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don’t know it” (Žižek, *Violence* 53). This disavowal involves a violation of his spontaneous ethical proclivity, brutal repression, and self-denial.

For Levinas, what would make this event ethical, is precisely Maass’s proximity to the Other, for his proximity makes him answer for his responsibility to the neighbor. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas takes into account the self-referential face of the neighbor. To encounter the face and claim that a face can “guarantee itself,” is to acknowledge the face as the nonlinguistic point of reference between the ‘big Other’ of the symbolic order and the neighbor-as-Other (202). For Žižek, however, the human face is always already caught up in the symbolic order, engaged as that which gentrifies the reality of the neighbor (“Neighbors” 146). The neighbor is therefore never revealed in the face of the Other, but in his/her defacement: “Far from displaying ‘a quality of God’s image carried with it,’ the face is the ultimate ethical lure...The neighbor is not displayed through a face; it is in his or her fundamental dimension a *faceless monster*” (ibid 185).

### **Beyond the Face of Monstrosity Which is the Neighbor**

The Serbs do not have a monopoly on moral insanity. It is  
humans who have failed, once more.  
Maass 55.

Every ethical gesture with the exception of the ethics of psychoanalysis relies on fetishistic disavowal (as I have demonstrated with Maass’s tragically misplaced ethical conviction). Such ethics do not embrace the face of the neighbor as the condition for sublime ethical enthusiasm.



Rather this ethical gesture locates the neighbor in its vulgarity, impenetrability, and brutality in its very monstrosity. Consequently, I find Derrida's notion of unconditional hospitality troubling for it instructs us not to objectify but to humanize the Other. Against the background of the Bosnian conflict, the premise of this presupposition is that the neighbor is a person with a rich spiritual and emotional life whose story we have not heard. Could we make that same claim about Radovan Karadžić? The very same person who commits terrible acts of torture towards the Other can (and does) display humanity and care for members of their own group. It is quite possible that Radovan Karadžić, who ordered the slaughtering of innocent civilians, also wrote letters to his family expressing his sincere love. Derrida's concept of unconditional hospitality that humanizes the Other allows for Radovan Karadžić's traumatic intrusion and monstrosity to be subjectivised. Such an ethical gesture ensures voice and agency, similar to Karadžić's narration of himself not as a war criminal, but as a deeply pained individual, yearning for love and belonging, at the International Court of Justice in Hague. The monstrous torturer reveals himself as a compassionate, kind and sincere person.

The limit to Karadžić personification as a desperate individual, deeply hurt, and yearning for company, is a figure of Karadžić as a horrible

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thing, an object, traumatic intruder, and the monster no one dares to confront. However, the gap between Karadžić's intimate experiences (and quite possibly his authentic inner life) and the atrocity and ruthlessness of his war crimes (his ethical monstrosity) is immense. "The experience that we have of our lives from within, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves in order to account for what we are doing, is fundamentally a lie – the truth lies outside, in what we do" (Žižek, *Violence* 47). Despite a seemingly universal neighbor-love injunction, something in this ethic of responsibility remains opaque, enigmatic, and impenetrable. Derrida's ethical hospitality does not account for the very inhuman monstrosity within us – the unfathomable abyss of radical otherness under the guise of the human neighbor.



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