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Inhabiting Boundaries: Derrida, Glissant and Convivial Hospitality

Introduction

In recent decades, hospitality has acquired a double and contradictory urgency. On the one hand, mass tourism has transformed it into a global industry, governed by logics of consumption and efficiency. On the other, growing migratory movements across different regions of the world have brought hospitality back into the arena of political conflicts. Between hospitality sold as a commodity and hospitality offered as ethical responsibility, a space opens for rethinking it philosophically.

Indeed, hospitality makes the constitutive tensions embedded in the enduring idea of boundaries particularly visible. Every gesture of welcome implies a threshold: an inside and an outside, a space that belongs to someone and that can be opened – or closed – to whoever arrives. Jacques Derrida famously exposes the aporia at the heart of hospitality through the figure of the door: “for there to be hospitality, there must be a door. But if there is a door, there is no longer hospitality” (Derrida 2000, 14). Without a door there is no hospitality, yet with a door hospitality is always already conditioned. Boundaries are therefore not accidental to hospitality, rather they are its very condition. Yet, they are also its limit. Who draws them, who controls them, and under what conditions they can be crossed are never neutral questions. Hospitality unfolds precisely where questions of identity, sovereignty, and power come into play.

This contribution argues that food and taste offer a privileged terrain for interrogating these tensions. Eating radically unsettles thresholds that are first and foremost ontological: the external becomes internal, an alien substance becomes body, the world is incorporated into the self. At the same time, hospitality enacted through food exposes ethical and political borders: who is invited to enter my home and sit at my table, under what conditions, and according to which norms of recognition and control.

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The table thus becomes a paradigmatic space where demarcation lines between self and other, host and guest, openness and mastery are continuously traced, negotiated, sometimes contested. The encounter with otherness – whether it takes the form of unfamiliar food or of sharing one's table with someone – radically calls into question any ontological claim, revealing its fundamentally relational nature. As Édouard Glissant evocatively argues, relation “is passage, [...] that passes itself off as passage” (1997, 188), thereby conditioning and unsettling the very principles that regulate the laws of hospitality.

Starting from an analysis of eating as a relational and processual practice, this article reconsiders the question of hospitality through a dialogue between Derrida and Glissant. Their theoretical insights are then explored through a concrete case study: *Refettorio Ambrosiano* in Milan, a project of collective social catering interweaving solidarity, art and fine dining. This case brings into focus hospitality as a complex and situated *practice*, traversed by power asymmetries, moments of negotiation, and uneven forms of agency. By examining food, doors, tables, and artworks, the article shows how convivial hospitality emerges as a space crossed by irreducible questions – one that nonetheless opens the possibility of rethinking ethics in pluralistic and relational terms.

The Processual Boundaries of Eating

The word *hospitality* derives from the Latin *hospes* – the Greek ξένος – which designates a reciprocal relation: *hospes* is both host and guest, the one who gives hospitality and the one who receives it. To be guest means to depend on otherness: on the one who offers food, but also on what is actually consumed, eaten, “hosted” within our bodies. This dependence requires trust. Accepting the other lies at the heart of hospitality, which in its most archaic sense involves offering food as an act of participation in a universal community – one that extends even to enemies and strangers¹.

To grasp the relationship between hospitality and food, and to appreciate the inherently convivial nature of this practice, one might begin by reflecting on the very act of eating itself. Food is not merely a medium of welcome; it is a practice that radically challenges every conceivable boundary between body and world. Eating means opening oneself, hosting otherness and thereby becoming transformed: billions of living beings – viruses, bacteria – are incorporated through nourishment. We are constituted by para-

¹ This dynamic persists today in practices known as “Gastrodiplomacy”, cf. Rockower 2012.

sites (Heldke 2026) in a process that is simultaneously vital and potentially dangerous. On evolutionary and epigenetic levels, taste is simultaneously neophobic and neophilic – situated at the fracture point between caution toward the potentially dangerous unknown and the desire for openness as an active discovery of the other. This tension embodies the dynamics between conservative and innovative dimensions present in every food identity, whether individual or collective. Taste always requires incorporation and assimilation, which challenge any possibility of clear demarcation: we eat food while simultaneously merging with it, becoming what we eat. Yet precisely for this reason, tasting is never mere subjugation to self; it also means exposing ourselves to what we cannot fully control.

Building on this foundation, Jean-Paul Sartre defines knowing in the final section of *Being and Nothingness* as a special form of assimilation of the known object, as a mode “to devour it yet without consuming it” (Sartre 1956, 740). Like material consumption, this mode is always implicated: eating means entering into relation with the other, both knowing and consuming it. Emmanuel Lévinas pursued this line of thought by theorizing gustatory incorporation as a relation that is simultaneously active and receptive, originating in the experience of hunger (cf. Lévinas 1961; 1974). In his effort to theorize enjoyment, he links the need for nourishment to the pleasure it provides: the need for food reveals not just the necessity of survival but the satisfaction of desire – of “a hunger”. Through the mingling of eating subject and eaten object, taste becomes the modality of knowing both ourselves and the other. Hunger represents our primordial intentional openness to the world, extending beyond gustatory experience to encompass everything we need: from the very beginning, we nourish ourselves on meaning as much as on food. What makes our appetite significant is its dual nature: never merely passive acceptance, it is simultaneously active search. Following John Dewey, we might say that gustatory sensibility begins as an *impulsion* (Dewey 2005, 60), from which all experience *of* and *with* the world originates. This impulse binds together need and desire, intention and reception. The gustatory system lives exactly in this tension between necessity and pleasure. Though initially understood as insatiable or blind appetite, the sense of taste – through its bivalent nature – bridges the gap between passive, unreflective desire and active pursuit of otherness. These peculiar traits reveal the relational nature of knowing and eating. Recent aesthetic proposals suggest treating our relation with food as a privileged site for developing new models of both knowledge and subjectivity (Perrullo 2018; Heldke 2026). Boundaries between bodies are not rigid but blurred; what we consume, use, and enact holds profound transformative power. On this view, taste functions as a specific perceptual modality of the relation between living beings and their environments.

Within this framework, food and eating call for a deeply relational approach. As suggested, every gustatory identity emerges through a continuous exchange between internal and external – not only because food comes from spaces and times other than the eater's, but because, through eating, the taster's identity itself is revealed as originally relational. Such an approach attends neither to “object” nor to “subject,” since relation precedes both: far from replacing the object as reified base-unit, it reveals an always dynamic polarity between passive feeling and active doing. Between bodies and world, subjects and objects, there prevails a continuous overlapping demanding processual, rather than ontological, frameworks. From this perspective, the body is a body-environment, plastically related to everything surrounding it; consequently, environment is no longer conceived as a mere spatial receptacle for bodies. This positioning locates bodies within ecologies, where perceptions are already actions with the environment (Noë 2005). Significantly, this relational understanding resonates with insights developed within other philosophical traditions. In Hindu philosophy, for instance, the person is conceived as “permeable, composite, partly divisible, and transmissible” (Marriott 1996, 194). Processes commonly assumed to develop inside one's body are “continuous with processes of exchange between and among persons” (*Ibid.*). Without fixed bodily boundaries or delimited entities, “a process which one might think of as *internal* to the person, that of digestion, is externalized in Hindu thought, and imagined to encompass processes of production and exchange *between* persons” (Pinard 1991, 228). Once more, food assimilation exposes the fragility of thresholds between self and other, as well as between body and environment. Yet assimilation is never neutral: in eating, otherness may be transformed to the point of disappearance within the self. If nourishment tends toward full incorporation, hospitality is oriented toward assimilating but simultaneously sustaining the other's irreducibility. In this light, hospitality – deeply embedded in the act of nourishing – becomes a paradigmatic practice for interrogating the difference between guest and host, which remains always opaque, never clear, certainly not distinct.

The Paradoxes of Hospitality

Though hospitality has been decisive in shaping social relations across cultures and historical periods, it has been a virtue largely neglected by the Western philosophical tradition. Raymond Boisvert and Lisa Heldke call it a “food virtue” (2016, 34), as it manifests through

and with food, rooted in the acts of nourishing and sharing the table. Perhaps precisely this material nature has kept philosophical thought at a distance from hospitality².

It is with Lévinas that the topic becomes philosophically salient: neither merely an ethical option nor a codified social practice, he considers hospitality as a *philosophical event* interrogating the very boundaries of identity and responsibility to the Other (Lévinas 1961). Building on his insights, Derrida and Glissant have profoundly reshaped our understanding of hospitality, both from marginal positions: while Derrida, as Algerian-born Jew in France, inhabited the edges of Western philosophy, exposing its internal aporias, Glissant speaks from the Caribbean archipelago, which is for him not only geographical origin but philosophical expression of a different logic of relation – intimately familiar with what it means to be the stranger rendered transparent before the gaze of the host (who is actually the hosted colonizer). Their perspectives, while distinct in origin and emphasis, prove complementary in revealing hospitality constitutive tensions.

Derrida characterizes hospitality as a paradoxical and risky act, situated in the tension between belonging and exclusion. Hospitality is “a self-contradictory concept and experience which can only self-destruct” (Derrida 2000, 5) when put into practice, never yielding clear knowledge of its boundaries. That is because hospitality resists objective knowledge, eluding conceptual grasp precisely in the moment of being practiced (7). For this reason, one must distinguish between the conditional laws of hospitality – those social, juridical, and cultural rules regulating who can enter another’s space – and the absolute, unconditional Law. The first are necessary: without them, there would be no home, no state, no identity. Yet these laws always, in some measure, betray the Law – that “absolute hospitality, *unconditional*, hyperbolic” (Derrida 2021, 103) – which would transgress all particular regulations to welcome or be welcomed (applying to both host and guest). There exists a continuous tension between hospitality’s universal Law and its particular laws – a tension that cannot be resolved but rather must be inhabited. The door’s paradox previously quoted leads to the heart of Derridean hospitality: without a door, there is no inside and outside, no distinction between motherland and foreign country, host and guest; but with the door come control and power. Whoever holds the keys decides who has access and who does not, rendering hospitality always – inevitably – conditioned. This paradox manifests in

² If this holds true for philosophy, it does not apply in the same way to mythology and religion. The myth of Philemon and Baucis is paradigmatic in this respect, portraying hospitality through the offering of food as a gesture that is at once sacred and ordinary (cf. Boisvert and Heldke 2016, 35).

the distinction between hospitality of *invitation* and hospitality of *visitation* (Derrida 2000, 14): if I invite someone, I know who is arriving, their name, identity, and not least their intentions. I can prepare the house, choose what to offer, maintain some control over the situation. But if I accept an unexpected arrival, a visit might transform into an invasion. Unconditional hospitality must remain open, free of expectations, ready to embrace any visit, even the unwanted or dangerous one.

This is why Derrida prefers to speak of *hostipitality*, emphasizing the close etymological relation between hospitality and hostility, both linked to the Latin *hostis* – the stranger, and thus potential enemy. There exists a fundamental degree of hostility in all acts of hospitality, for it reflects the delicate power game between guest and host. The relation is characterized by a subtle confusion of roles: the guest, though welcomed, remains a stranger, while the host always maintains a position of authority. Derrida emphasizes that hospitality is, “necessarily, a right, a duty, an obligation” (4), but only on condition that the host remains master of the place. In this sense, hospitality’s laws also become the laws of a place, a house, and consequently, of a land. Hospitality presupposes property: to offer hospitality, I must possess a house, yet this very mastery is precisely what conditions hospitality, for it introduces the threshold delimited by doors. Nonetheless, this concept serves Derrida in challenging more classical dichotomies: beyond questioning the categories of guest and host, *hostipitality* facilitates critical reevaluation of boundaries between self and other, private and public, inside and outside, individual and collective, personal and political, emotional and rational. It thus becomes a conceptual battleground where fundamental questions of identity, sovereignty, and justice are at stake.

If Derrida exposes the limits and internal contradictions at the heart of hospitality, Glissant offers a complementary vision rooted in his *Poetics of Relation*. The Franco-Caribbean writer develops a reflection on encountering the other that, while not always explicitly using the term “hospitality”, proves particularly fertile for rethinking it, especially through his concepts of relation and opacity. Consonant with the relational aesthetic outlined above, he understands relation not as a simple bond but as a way of existing in the world that resists total transparency, assimilation, reduction of otherness to self. Relation is not simply a link between two separate entities: it is the world’s very fabric, a continuous movement of encounters, exchanges, transformations. Relation “contaminates and sweetens” as it “is the knowledge in motion of beings” (1997, 187). Accordingly, hospitality is not an isolated event but a continuous, reciprocal process in which both host and guest are transformed through encounter.

Central to this reflection is the concept of opacity (*opacité*). Glissant proposes what he calls the “right to opacity” (190) – the right of individu-

als and cultures to exist without being completely reduced to the known, as the “subsistence within an irreducible singularity” (*ibid.*). Opacity is not obscurity – “though it is possible for it to be so” (191) – nor refusal to participate, rather recognition that the other remains, ultimately, unknowable in their totality, and that this irreducibility must be respected, indeed celebrated. Glissant writes: “To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to *grasp* him” (193, *my italics*). This right to opacity challenges the desire for knowledge and control that often accompanies acts of welcome, for opacity permits coexistence without full comprehension, recognition without assimilation. It is a form of respect that passes not through total transparency but through accepting difference as such. In hospitality’s context, this means welcoming the other without pretending to decode them, without reducing them to familiar categories, without assimilating them to the known world. The host needs not necessarily “grasp” the guest to offer them a place at their table. Indeed, the attempt to comprehension – *cum-prehendere*, to grasp together – can become a form of symbolic violence, a way of denying otherness by reducing it to what is already known. Here his response to the Derridean aporia becomes clear: where Derrida emphasizes the impossibility of unconditional hospitality, Glissant opens hospitality onto a space of possibility, enacted through a different practice. He does so by distinguishing between transparency – the colonial project of Enlightenment and Western modernity, which aims to render everything visible, thus knowable and ultimately controllable – and opacity, which is the right to maintain oneself in a zone of complexity and untranslatability.

In Glissant’s view, opacity is not only a resistance strategy but also a creative, poetic proposal. Hence his connection to the concept of *creolization* – the mixing and interaction of cultures producing new and unpredictable forms, which he prefers to the term *hybridity* (*métissage*), for its value of unforeseeability (2020a, 8)³. This reflection is profoundly linked to the colonial history of the Caribbean and the diasporic condition, as well as to their archipelagic nature. Unlike the continent – image of totality and unique, deep roots – the *archipelago* has rhizomatic roots, consisting of distinct yet connected islands. Each island has its own identity, history, language, yet also relates to others through sea, winds, exchanges.

³ “Because creolization is unforeseeable, whereas one can calculate in advance the effects of hybridity. The effects of a hybridization of plants through grafting or of animals through crossbreeding can be calculated; one can predict that mixing red beans and white beans by grafting will produce a certain result after one generation, a different result after another generation. But creolization is hybridity with an added value, namely unforeseeability” (*ibid.*).

The archipelago is for him a figure of relation, of proximity without homogenization⁴. In terms of hospitality, an archipelagic thinking reflects a model where different identities can coexist and interact without forcing complete fusion, creating space for reciprocal transformation. Identity itself is never proclamatory but always *operational* (*opératoire*) in its expression (2020b, 19), processual rather than ontological. Hospitality thus becomes not a unilateral gesture from host towards guest, but a bilateral – if not multilateral – process in which the encounter transforms every agent involved.

Finally, the question of language – addressed by both – resonates particularly strongly with that of hospitality through the medium of food. Like language, food offering is a way of communicate which always resists full translation. For Derrida, unconditional hospitality represents a suspension of language as a categorizing instrument: we must resist, he explains, the temptation to investigate the guest's origin, for absolute hospitality consists in opening the door to otherness without seeking reciprocity, without requiring the other to validate their identity. In other words, without forcing the other into *monolingualism* as a precondition of hospitality (Derrida 1996). This raises equally pressing difficulties: does hospitality “consist *in*, does it begin *with* the question addressed” as a sign of recognition, or “rather with a welcome without question? [...] Is it more just and more loving to question or not to question?” (Derrida 2021, 84) Is hospitality directed towards a subject, therefore someone possessing a name? The question of hospitality thus evolves into a question about questioning itself. Derrida's analysis here confronts Lévinas' claim that language equals hospitality: “To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces” (Lévinas 1979, 76), for it is through speech that one gives space to the other's enjoyment, recognizing the transcendence of otherness. According to Derrida, this position reveals a fundamental one-sidedness. Unconditional hospitality should suspend any kind of language, because language is always already a way of categorizing, and thus reducing the other to the knowable. Derrida invites us to recognize an irresolvable tension. Language is necessary to communicate and identify, yet it simultaneously categorizes and excludes. Hospitality inhabits this tension without ever resolving it.

Glissant's response to this aporia is characteristically concrete and creative: through creolization, he reimagines hospitality's as “languages of compromise” rather than communication – languages shaped through the fertile confusion of poetic orality (1997, 105). Communication lan-

⁴ On the archipelago, see Glissant 2020a, 93; 2023, 148; on the idea of the rhizomatic root, see Glissant 1997, 11; 2020a, 43, where he states: “the single root claims the dimension of depth and the rhizomatic root extends horizontally outwards”; 2020b, 11.

guages – in their “atavistic fluidity” (106) – generate intolerance, while compromise languages maintain space for what escapes translation, being “vernacular or composite or subversive” (117). Because compromise languages emerge from the confusion of relationships rather than from systems of meaning, they find their most adequate expression not in transparent communication but in artistic practices. This is where Glissant’s poetics truly reveals its inseparability from his philosophy of relation. Art is relational, it creates spaces for encounter not through explanation but through evocation and invitation; poetry is that imaginative possibility for knowing the real in its traces, for breaking the link between language and nation, for conceiving the *chaos-world* that is encounter and “clash” with manifold diversities (Glissant 2020b; 2023). Poetry allows flourishing of what Glissant calls thought of the trace (*trace*), which opposes systematic one and, in its wandering (*errance*), guides us by putting us all in relation (2020b, 9). Where Derrida sees irresolvable impasse, Glissant discovers poetic possibility. In any case, both conceive hospitality as a space of productive tension, one that constantly demands negotiation. In food offering, these tensions become even more tangible: they involve not only who asks questions or holds the keys, but also who cooks, what is offered, and who is permitted to eat. Never neutral, these questions invariably express power relations and logics of inclusion and exclusion – a dynamic that becomes particularly visible in the daily practice of collective social catering.

The Door and the Table

At the entrance to Refettorio Ambrosiano stands the *Porta dell'Accoglienza* (Welcome Door) by Italian artist Mimmo Paladino: an enormous sculptural threshold decorated with symbols of life – water, earth, bread – that seems to materialize the Derridean paradox of hospitality. The door welcomes and invites, yet simultaneously separates, monumentally, an inside from an outside.

Refettorio Ambrosiano is a social solidarity project that unites *haute cuisine*, art and design⁵. Conceived by chef Massimo Bottura⁶ and artistic director Davide Rampello during Expo Milano 2015, it

⁵ The project is promoted and managed by *Caritas*, a Catholic charitable organization dedicated to social welfare and the promotion of charity, which oversees a large portion of collective catering and food-assistance programs in Italian urban contexts.

⁶ Massimo Bottura is one of the most renowned Italian chefs worldwide, leading a new generation that blends Italian culinary tradition with the legacy of 1970s-80s French *nouvelle cuisine* and the influence of 1990s Catalan techno-emotional cooking.

was created to provide food to those in need while combining nourishment with artistic values. The Refettorio was meant to utilize Expo 2015 food waste through the renovation of an abandoned theater in Greco, a peripheral Milan neighborhood, with contributions from many prominent figures in Italian design, art, and craftsmanship. It serves approximately 160 registered guests: 60 from a reception center and 100 from other centers.

Here, as in many collective catering projects, hospitality functions as a guiding principle in communication and approach, perceived both as an act of welcome toward society's most vulnerable members and as commitment to a "more hospitable world" through projects against food waste or for environmental sustainability. Moreover, hospitality is always associated with the notion of conviviality. The two seem inseparable: speak of one and you inevitably invoke the other, as if hospitality through food inherently entailed the idea of communal gathering. In this regard, even the name choice is significant: "refettorio" derives from Latin *reficere*, "to restore", drawing inspiration from monastic models. The tables recall Cistercian monks' ones, evoking a consolidated tradition of sharing and community.

In relation to this case study, hospitality will be interpreted through the exploration of three main themes: the code of conduct, the role of artworks, and the ambiguous engagement with food. The Refettorio manifesto describes its approach as follows:

An important indicator of the project's success lies in the climate of familiarity permeating those who live and animate the Refettorio Ambrosiano. Everything stems from the sense of "being expected" that the 96 guests experience – a feeling that ensures everyone is called by name, everyone has their own table, finds the same dining companions, sits in their usual place. This creates a family atmosphere that becomes even more meaningful at a special moment like dinner.⁷

Feeling awaited, called by name, having one's own table and even a habitual seat: the Refettorio promises a form of hospitality offering recognition, continuity, belonging. But what does "calling someone by name" presuppose in this context? And when hospitality creates "family," what roles and what power dynamics are established?

Central to its approach is management of guest information. Guests are pre-registered, but only "good motivations" are required, no official documents (since many guests lack them). There is, therefore, a form of registration that occurs prior to official entry into the Refettorio

⁷ From refettorioambrosiano.it/il-progetto/, accessed December 18, 2025 (trans. mine).

“family.” For Derrida, this very pre-registration constitutes the ethical gesture that situates hospitality within conditional laws. Once inside, however, no personal information is shared with staff or volunteers, in order to foster freer and more open relations. As the priest managing the *Caritas* community states: there is no curiosity about guests’ past lives, and this serves to foster harmonious relations at table (Svatek 2016). Volunteers are even encouraged not to ask anything about personal histories to favor this dynamic. On one hand, this choice reflects an attempt to respect guests’ “right to opacity”: it is not necessary to know their past to welcome them. Curiosity can be invasive, becoming a form of control. On the other, paradoxically, guests should be called by name, have their own table, sit with the same people, as the manifesto states. Calling someone by name means knowing who is arriving: hospitality is offered to subjects with recognized, recognizable identity. This is hospitality of *invitation*, that creates security, familiarity, continuity, yet simultaneously allows the host to maintain mastery over their own space. Moreover, this form of *hostipitality* is presented as a device for producing a sense of familiarity. Indeed, family itself can be the site of mastery par excellence, where the father holds the keys. Creating a sense of family thus also means creating hierarchies, roles, expectations: who is the father and who the children in the Refettorio? What roles is each called to play? The project seeks to create hospitality that is simultaneously conditioned – presupposing registration, a name, a fixed place – and unconditioned. But this unconditionality is not Derrida’s absolute law; rather, it is understood as a form of “willful blindness”: the past is not asked about, thus cannot be judged. As if silence about personal histories could guarantee relations free from prejudice, as if truly unconditional relations were possible simply by abstaining from questions. This operationalization of opacity as strategic ignorance risks neutralizing its political and relational force.

Secondly, Refettorio aims to create a language of hospitality through art. Its space is not neutral but possesses a clear, highly coherent artistic identity that creates certain expectations, perhaps even a kind of reverence. According to the official description, the project is:

a synecdoche in which the kitchen takes the form of a great fireplace where the ritual of food preparation unfolds. The hall’s frescoes, the vestibule with its theme of bread and water, the door of welcome, the waiting benches, the domestic lighting, and the furnishings that invite sitting together – all of this is a sign of compassion but also of redemption. Art makes this community belong to humanity, enveloping it in an inclusive atmosphere.⁸

⁸ *Ibid.*

Art becomes a tool for creating an atmosphere transcending mere bodily nourishment. Paladino's Door is the most evident example, but the entire space is inhabited by art: the 13 designer tables bear evocative names – *Desco*, *Fratino*, *Convivium* – recalling the tradition of sharing meals; photographer Carlo Benvenuto's *Metaphysical Bread* and Enzo Cucchi's fresco *Homo Novus* dialogue with food's sacred and everyday dimensions. As Bottura emphasizes, the aim is offering dignity and beauty, an experience not merely of survival but of elevation. From a Glissantian perspective, art is understood here as a language of hospitality: the Refettorio has sought, through art and design, not to *represent* hospitality, but to *enact* it⁹.

Yet, there is always the risk that art itself may become a means of imposing good taste. Here, art functions both as a relational device – situating guests within a shared experience – and as a normative one, subtly signaling what dignity entails. Some volunteers perceive the artistic atmosphere as a generous gesture of inclusion¹⁰, but some guests might not notice it at all, or might feel uncomfortable, even out of place. Art risks becoming double-edged: a language of hospitality but also its potential barrier. How can art be a space of welcome without becoming one of exclusion for those not sharing its codes? How can aesthetics serve ethics without replacing it? These questions remain open precisely because hospitality is never a guaranteed result but a practice measured in its operativity. After all, if hospitality is always traversed by hostility – if it carries a constitutive dimension of disturbance – perhaps discomfort before art is not so much hospitality's failure as a symptom of its constitutively ambiguous nature. Art itself possesses a disturbing dimension: it does not merely soothe or decorate, but interrogates, unsettles, and calls those who encounter it into a relation of responsibility.

This ambiguity manifests perhaps even more directly in relation to food itself, the third point of this analysis. Alongside the permanent works of art, in fact, are ephemeral ones: dishes created by chefs – from Alain Ducasse to René Redzepi, to name just a couple among the world's

⁹ The present contribution does not engage in detail with the debate on “relational aesthetics/art,” most notably developed by Nicolas Bourriaud, who conceives artistic practice as the production of intersubjective situations and shared social spaces (Bourriaud 1998). He explicitly reflects on hospitality and the shared meal as paradigmatic relational forms, and discusses, among others, the convivial and participatory practices of artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose work frequently centers on cooking and eating together as aesthetic events (see Bourriaud 2004). While the present argument develops along a different philosophical path, these approaches constitute an important contemporary articulation of conviviality and the aesthetics of hospitality.

¹⁰ Some of this information was recorded during a personal research visit to the Refettorio Ambrosiano on May 13, 2024.

most celebrated – who, using Expo waste, brought otherwise inaccessible *haute cuisine* to the guests of the Refettorio. In Bottura's vision, this practice is meant to transcend symbolic dimension: it aims to make gastronomic technique and creativity accessible to those habitually excluded, thus redefining the social roles of chef and diner.

Nonetheless, some guests refuse what is offered at the Refettorio, especially when renowned chefs cook. As we have seen, food goes beyond nourishment to become knowledge, communication, culture, memory. The act of eating involves continuous negotiation between incorporation and demarcation. Eating together and sharing food is an affirmation of identity and vehicle of exchange, but can also be a moment of refusal and resistance. Conviviality does not resolve conflict; it organizes a space in which conflict is constitutive rather than accidental. When a starred chef prepares a sophisticated dish from recovered ingredients, they are performing hospitality through their culinary art. But what happens if the guest does not recognize that food, does not desire or like it? Food refusal is an affirmation of irreducible otherness. This refusal is philosophically pregnant, for it reminds us that hospitality is never unilateral and that the guest always maintains a form of agency, even in vulnerability. At the same time, this tension is not symmetrical: refusal has profoundly different material consequences for those who can afford to refuse and those who, by refusing, risk not eating at all. The discomfort of hospitality appears to be never merely symbolic: it is measured in concrete vulnerability and in power asymmetry between who offers and who receives. Like a language of communication – not of compromise – food carries unavoidable values, resisting translation. Transcending nourishment, food functions as a tool for reciprocal recognition, situated in that *hospitality* Derrida invites us to recognize as constitutive of every gesture of welcome – that, rather than canceling power hierarchies, renders them visible. Indeed, when fine dining techniques enter a space of social fragility, tension can arise between performance and presence. This stems from an evolution in cooking's very idea: spectacle and mediatization transformed chefs into celebrities. And when a celebrity enters the kitchen, the risk is that kitchen becomes a stage, shifting attention from relation to recognition. Chefs bring skill and creativity, a way of relating to food that elevates the meal to aesthetic event. Yet guests' food refusal reveals that cooking, even when conceived artistically, should remain in hospitality service, not replace it. Even the most renowned chef is called to occupy the host's position rather than the performer's. Hospitality seems to require, from both sides, willingness to suspend expectations and desires for recognition. The host does not host to be thanked but to respond to a call, to a hunger that – Lévinas insists – is not only physiological but existential.

Refettorio Ambrosiano thus manifests, emblematically, the constitutive tensions of hospitality. Paladino's monumental door materializes the Derridean paradox; the name called, the table assigned, the fixed place trace identificatory lines promising recognition yet maintaining control; art creates an atmosphere of elevation becoming simultaneously an aesthetic threshold excluding those not sharing its codes; food offered by chefs is a vehicle of hospitality that can transform into a Glissantian "language of communication" imposing values. Each element reflects the tension between aspiration to hospitality respecting opacity and the practical necessity of exercising a form of mastery over one's own table.

Inhabiting opaque Boundaries

In light of the reflections offered so far, one might ask: what, and how, can hospitality be preserved? As Lévinas writes: "To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give" (1979, 75). It is hunger that obliges us, that makes us hosts before we even decide to be hosts. Hospitality has appeared not as a deliberate choice, but as a response to a call that precedes us. In the realm of food-based hospitality, these relational dynamics become particularly tangible: the body incorporating food continuously blurs distinctions; the door welcoming the guest traces material separations between inside and outside; a language that calls someone by name establishes thresholds of identification; food, offered or refused, marks cultural and power lines. Yet these separations remain provisional, serving as reference points that allow us to establish rules, organize practices, and delineate duties. In the very act of eating, they reveal themselves as constructs, emerging from a more fundamental relationality in which sharp distinctions between inside and outside, between self and world, begin to dissolve. What occurs instead is a continuous crossing and reciprocal transformation, in which the external becomes internal, and the Other becomes part of the self.

From this perspective, the theoretical reflections of Derrida and Glissant have gained concrete resonance. For Derrida, every hospitable boundary is paradoxical: absolute hospitality remains a regulative ideal towards which to tend but which can never be fully realized. Glissant proposes a slightly different model: between archipelago and continent, between languages of compromise and of communication, he traces a map of boundaries that host without mastering, invite without enclosing. His Relation is not a simple bond between preexisting entities but the meshwork of reality: a continuous movement of encounters and transformations preceding any rigid distinction between separate identities. Boundaries, in this perspective, are membranes: sites of exchange, osmosis, continuous redefinition.

The Refettorio Ambrosiano case has shown how these theoretical tensions translate into concrete practices. After all, where there is a hospitable door, inside there is always someone cooking. The question of convivial hospitality is thus, inevitably, also the question of who – and therefore how – cooks, with all the implications of acceptance or refusal, and the hierarchy inscribed in every gesture of welcome through food. Food too, far from being a universal language of conviviality, is situated at the intersection of hostility and hospitality. And perhaps precisely in this interval resides the possibility of hospitable practice. By recognizing that hospitality is not exhausted in the act of offering but also involves the capacity to welcome refusal, it is possible to keep open the space of relation even when it fails to produce hoped-for harmony. Concrete hospitality is thus marked by an internal tension, which is not a failure but its very condition of possibility. Especially Glissant allows us to read this tension not as lack, but as a relational field.

What emerges is the horizon of a pluralist ethics oriented towards opacity: relational rather than individualist, recognizing boundaries as temporary crystallizations, starting not from isolated identities but from constitutive relation. Practicing hospitality means accepting the risk of encounters that cannot be controlled, of unexpected visits, and of responses that may be withheld or refused. This risk cannot be eliminated without betraying hospitality itself. Acknowledging these tensions requires adopting an ethical posture that does not settle for conciliatory narratives but interrogates concrete practices, both their conditions of possibility and their limits. As Heldke and Boisvert (2016) recall, hospitality summons responses that are never certain or infallible, grounded not in abstract principles but in situated engagement through which one acts. Between the dissolution of boundaries and their continuous re-tracing in acts of occasioned identification lies the most productive site for rethinking the relation with the other as a space of transformation through encounter. A space between door and table, where the possibilities and paradoxes of living together are continuously at play.

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Inhabiting Boundaries: Derrida, Glissant and Convivial Hospitality

This contribution explores the topic of convivial hospitality by bringing Jacques Derrida and Édouard Glissant into dialogue. By showing how taste and food unsettle boundaries between bodies and world, it rethinks the grammars of hospitable borders at the intersection of ontology, ethics and politics. These theoretical insights are then explored through the case study of *Refettorio Ambrosiano* in Milan, a project of collective social catering. By examining food, doors, tables and artworks, the article shows how convivial hospitality emerges as a space crossed by irreducible questions – one that nonetheless opens the possibility of rethinking ethics in pluralistic and relational terms.

Keywords: Hospitality; Food; Derrida; Glissant; Refettorio Ambrosiano

Abitare i confini: Derrida, Glissant e l'ospitalità conviviale

L'articolo affronta il tema dell'ospitalità conviviale attraverso un dialogo tra Jacques Derrida ed Édouard Glissant. Mostrando come il gusto e il cibo siano in grado di interrogare i confini tra i corpi e il mondo, si propone un ripensamento della nozione stessa di ospitalità sul piano ontologico, etico e politico. Tali spunti vengono poi messi alla prova attraverso un caso studio specifico: il Refettorio Ambrosiano di Milano, progetto di ristorazione collettiva per il sociale. Attraverso l'analisi di cibo, porte, tavoli e opere d'arte, l'articolo intende mostrare come l'ospitalità conviviale si configuri quale spazio percorso da contraddizioni irriducibili, e tuttavia capace di aprire a una ridefinizione dell'etica in chiave pluralistica e relazionale.

Parole chiave: Ospitalità; cibo, Derrida; Glissant; Refettorio Ambrosiano.