

Review of Richard Haswell and Janis Haswell’s *Hospitality and Authoring: An Essay for the English Profession*

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In the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks of November 2015 and the attention these acts drew to other experiences of terror globally, one of the more enduring images of human generosity that emerged from the tragedies was the response of some Parisians to keep *portes ouvertes* [\[http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/attack-in-paris-free-taxis-and-open-doors-how-france-responded-to-an-act-of-barbarity-with-acts-of-a6734526.html\]](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/attack-in-paris-free-taxis-and-open-doors-how-france-responded-to-an-act-of-barbarity-with-acts-of-a6734526.html) (open doors) for strangers stranded by the attacks. Posts to the Twitter hashtag #PorteOuverte announced addresses and languages spoken, and at least some desperate travelers in Paris found themselves with warm beds and safe haven for the night. Of course, millions of people watching the response to Paris reacted with hospitable thoughts—empathy, concern, prayers for the people in Paris. Yet something more rare and radical led a select few to open their doors to strangers even when the *chaos of the attacks* [\[http://www.euronews.com/2015/11/24/paris-attacker-abdelhami-abaaoud-returned-to-scene-of-shootings/\]](http://www.euronews.com/2015/11/24/paris-attacker-abdelhami-abaaoud-returned-to-scene-of-shootings/) made it impossible to know for sure if strangers were really “safe.” The difference in degree between these radical acts of hospitality and their more common expression in hopeful thoughts and gestures is worth considering against the background of hospitality that Richard Haswell and Janis Haswell present in *Hospitality and Authoring: An Essay for the English Profession*. The authors promise to make hospitality “a beginning point for a serious look at English practice” (3). But Haswell and Haswell also invoke a more basic question of what kind of hospitality can be cultivated in spaces where English is practiced. Can English classes truly prepare students to give up comfort and safety for the well-being of others? Can English classes teach a hospitality that demands, as Emmanuel Levinas writes, “[taking] the bread out of one’s own mouth, to nourish the hunger of the other with one’s own fasting” (56)? These questions are at the heart of Haswell and Haswell’s *Hospitality and Authoring*, a book which does its best to keep the “unfamiliar and unsettling” nature of hospitality in mind while also showing English teachers, students, and administrators why hospitality is valuable to our practices (14).

Hospitality and Authoring has the most to offer readers who are expecting hospitality in praxis—hospitality that they can use right now in their writing or literature courses. Haswell and Haswell largely align hospitality with the question of how “English teaching can be improved” (7), and the authors effectively attend to hospitality through instruction-centered concepts that position the teacher as guest (29), the classroom as nomadic space (29), and the student learner as “peregrine” (58). These classroom connections to hospitality are developed against a background of theory drawn especially from Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and a tradition of thinking that philosopher Kelly Oliver elsewhere calls “hyperbolic” ethics—an “ethics of limits” (3). Haswell and Haswell devote an entire chapter, in fact, to Levinas’s conception of hospitality in *Totality and Infinity*. From this study, they conclude that Levinas’s hospitality provides “a way for teachers or students who unknowingly want to be complete, safe, and finalized instead [...] to open themselves up to the incomplete, unsure, and infinite” (47). This working theory of hospitality is put to work in Chapter Three, “Hospitality in the Classroom,” when the authors explain how English teachers can “convert their classrooms into venues for hospitality” (50). This chapter notably inverts the host/guest hierarchy that has supported

English teachers' "habitual dominance" over students (54). Instead, Haswell and Haswell argue that teachers must become better hosts and even risk assuming the role of "guests" in their own classrooms. Such an inversion requires that teachers learn to live with the "peril" and "fear" of being vulnerable to students' unique life experiences (54-55). Vulnerability and fear are invoked again later in the chapter when Haswell and Haswell introduce the idea (attributed in part to Derrida) that "true hospitality settles in the margins" of society rather than in "the centers of power" (61).

Here and in several other unique and important moments, *Hospitality and Authoring* gestures toward a radical hospitality of the kind witnessed in the #PorteOuverte reactions in Paris. Turning aside from the book's focus on English practices and English teaching, Haswell and Haswell point out that hospitality has been associated traditionally with an obligation to "the elderly, the widower, the recluse, and the poor. Above all the poor" (61). Earlier, the authors make a similar connection to the "soup kitchen" as a space of heterotopic potentiality (29). These spectral images of *actual* margins of poverty and privilege appear only briefly in the book; yet, they beg the question of how hospitality within the walls of the English classroom can ever approach what Haswell and Haswell call the "true hospitality" of the margins (61). I am reminded of Ellen Cushman's extensive study of inner-city writing and literacy in *The Struggle and The Tools*, a book which repeatedly shows how distant and "foreign" academic discourses seem to those living on the margins (194). If, as Haswell and Haswell assert, "true hospitality operates away from [...] centers of power" (61), then it seems incumbent on us to keep in mind that our practices of hospitality within the academy are not the same thing as hospitality in the margins. Our versions will always reflect the privileges of the centers of power that we occupy.

Where Chapter Three offers an overview of how teachers can "make a worthy hospitality work" (53), Haswell and Haswell devote several other chapters to practical components of what we might call, following the authors' lead, a workable hospitality. Chapter Five, "Hospitable Reception," imagines hospitality applied to assessment in the form of teacher responses to student writing. The authors include several examples of student work, followed by discussions of how teachers might respond hospitably by "surrendering" authority to students (97). This surrendering includes the practice of "risky response," a response that creates welcome space for students to teach what they know rather than risk punishment for what they do not know (98-99). Chapter Six, "Ten Students Reflect on Their Independent Authoring," extends and expands this focus on student knowledge by presenting interviews with ten students on the subject of what they believe they as students bring to the concept of writing. From these interviews, Haswell and Haswell draw out a common perception that teachers are possessive and invasive of students' writing: students just want to write in ways that are "safe from unfriendly hands" (113), while teachers are conditioned by an "academic ethos" to "take over," critique, and control students' language (114-15). Haswell and Haswell ultimately argue that this concept of possession can be transformed through hospitable actions into an opportunity for teachers to surrender control over students' knowledge and attend to students as welcomed others (115).

In addition to the chapters above on writing pedagogy and assessment, Haswell and Haswell offer several other chapters that will appeal specifically to teachers of literature classes and to writing program administrators. Chapter Four, "Inhospitable Reception," describes hospitable acts of literary criticism; Chapter Seven, "The Novel as Moral Dialogue," reads the work of novelist Paul Mark Scott as a "model of the hospitable author" (117); and Chapter Ten offers what Haswell and Haswell call "tropes of learning change," which echo both the habits of mind in the [WPA "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing"](http://wpacouncil.org/framework) (<http://wpacouncil.org/framework>) and the "threshold concepts" in Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's *Naming What We Know*. These chapters add significantly to the overall usability of Haswell and Haswell's approach to hospitality. Haswell and Haswell have made it easy for instructors to pick and choose chapters that fit their curricula, and English teachers in a wide range of contexts will appreciate the authors' thoughtful inclusion of practices that cover critical theory (Chapter Two on Levinas and war), models of literary interpretation (Chapter Four on Michael Ondaatje), patterns of student-teacher response (Chapters Three and Five), and close readings of the creative writing process (Chapter Seven on Paul Mark Scott).

For all that *Hospitality and Authoring* offers to the English instructor, one of its more noticeable struggles is trying to move past a workable hospitality that remains tethered to the safe spaces of the English classroom. Although Haswell and Haswell promise a version of hospitality that is “unfamiliar and unsettling” (14), the practices treated by the various chapters in the book fit comfortably within a vision of English studies that will seem very familiar to many readers. I want to say that this limitation in scope is not a problem for Haswell and Haswell: they promise an “application” of hospitality to English classes (28), and this is what the book delivers. However, when I think about radical acts such as the *#PorteOuverte* reactions in Paris, I find myself wishing that the authors had created more openings to explore these hyperbolic, radically-lived acts of hospitality in connection to the book’s discussion of the English classroom. I wish that the authors had sustained their attention to ways that the English classroom can foster opposition to war, for instance (45), and ways that attending to the “margins” of society—the dispossessed and oppressed—might be made more central to English practices. Other scholars in the field have already devoted attention to political and ethical dimensions of marginality in relation to poverty (John Marsh), inequality (Vershawn Young), and foreigner relations (Diane Davis). These contributions are notably absent from the vision of hospitality that *Hospitality and Authoring* ultimately presents. They also point to an underlying question of how making English classrooms more hospitable will confront larger social inequalities. As Young writes, “schools are a symptom of the problem and [...] what we do in them cannot function as a solution to the problem” (710).

However, if readers can approach *Hospitality and Authoring* with the view that it is part of a larger conversation about marginality, vulnerability, and ethics in relation to English pedagogies and practices, then the book opens the door to other lines of inquiry that can extend and complicate Haswell and Haswell’s worthy gesture. One connection that seems particularly important to make is to scholarship that draws hospitality into radical acts of reimagining the basic “grounds” of English instruction. For Cynthia Haynes, who describes a “renegade” hospitality in “Writing Offshore,” and for Diane Davis, whose “Finitude’s Clamor” offers a different reading of Levinas’s radical ethics, hospitality is an act that dismantles, obliterates, and deconstructs the precepts of mastery that ground classroom practices in English. For Haynes, hospitality opens up to an ethics that is foreign to the “teaching machine” and the goals of the English classroom (711). For Davis, hospitality demands a “naked vulnerability” to others which “interrupts, disturbs, [and] unsettles” the certainty of English practices (140, 141). These lines of inquiry trace out the radical side of hospitality that Haswell and Haswell acknowledge (100) but ultimately keep at a distance. It makes sense that English teachers need a version of hospitality that is, as Haswell and Haswell argue, “adapted” to our familiar habits of teaching writing and literature (100). At the same time, we need to be challenged and inspired by scholarship that pushes us outside of our most comfortable domains.

I cannot think of a more hospitable way to recommend *Hospitality and Authoring* than to suggest that it opens up profound questions about the responsibility of English teaching that do not have easy or even practical answers. The book does not provide a ready-made model of hospitable action, but it does help us to imagine how English studies can take part in fostering the kind of self-sacrificial life practice that we find in the rare moment when we witness a stranger open the door and risk everything to welcome another.

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