

# Hosting the Crosser

## Janette Turner Hospital's *Borderline*

The border between two nations is always indicated by broken but definite lines, to indicate that it is not quite real in any physical sense but very real in a metaphysical sense.  
—Joyce Carol Oates, “Crossing the Border”

In his 1997 *Border Matters*, José David Saldívar called attention to the “anti-immigrant hysteria” of the times and to the gradual centrality of border matters in American studies (x). In the midst of mass migrations, border crossings, circulations, and renegotiations, the reconceptualization of the border and border zones has contributed to the identification of new topoi, new actors, and an overall “worlding” of American studies that has instilled a new transnational literacy in the US academy (Saldívar xiii). This reconsideration of the border as a paradigm of multiple crossings has also contributed to the understanding of culture in terms of material hybridity (instead of purity), which disrupts and customizes the imagined community of the nation (Saldívar 19). Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), figures prominently as the seminal exploration of a *mestiza* consciousness that moves between and among cultures, but what remains understudied is how the crossing of borders affects the allegedly stable identity of the community directly or indirectly involved in the process of hosting the crosser. It is possible to claim that the imagined stable community of the host nation, to echo Saldívar's invocation of Benedict Anderson, becomes “disrupted and customized” (19) as a result of the contact with a borderland subjectivity/ontology.

This article reroutes Saldívar's observations about American studies in the 1990s to the Canadian context in the 1980s. Although the US-Canadian border is not the birthplace of border studies (Roberts 191), an analysis of this particular border region, as Gillian Roberts has argued, “allows us to engage more comprehensively with a critical borderlands practice” (191)

and consciousness. Although the border in the Canadian imaginary has traditionally functioned to reinforce a *cordon sanitaire* separating Canada from the US (Roberts 9; Sadowski-Smith 12, 120), novels such as Janette Turner Hospital's *Borderline* and Jane Urquhart's *Sanctuary Line*, as well as Guillermo Verdecchia's works, among many other examples, clearly beg a reconsideration of Canada in the context of hemispheric borders. Canada is gradually taking a central stage in border literature, as the country situates itself at the crossroads of myriads of borders that are by definition mobile, fungible (Brady, "Fungibility"), unpredictable (Braidotti), and divisible (Derrida, *Aporias*). This repositioning of the border from marginal to central, to go back to Saldívar's words, has contributed to the "worlding" of Canadian literature, and has instilled a new transnational literacy in Canadian criticism. The shift, I argue, is manifest in Hospital's *Borderline* (1985). In *Discrepant Parallels*, Roberts claims that Hospital's novel rearticulates the significance of the border by overlaying the forty-ninth parallel with the Mexico-US border (195). In turn, the novel overlays the US-Canadian/US-Mexican border with other geopolitical boundaries, such as that between Quebec and English Canada,<sup>1</sup> thus providing a multidimensional border landscape. What are the implications of this overlapping and the ensuing creation of a borderscape?<sup>2</sup> If we assume Walter Mignolo's definition of "border thinking" as "the moments in which the imaginary of the modern world systematically cracks" (23), it is possible to examine how, in *Borderline*, Hospital offers a disruptive border thinking, a multidimensional border consciousness that brings the border within. The crosser is changed in the process, but so are those who accidentally host the crosser.

Significantly, Hospital herself has a borderline status in Canadian literature, for both her biography and publication history exist on the borders of a national literature. Born in Australia, Hospital lived in South Asia, Britain, and Canada, and now lives in the US. She is, indeed, an outsider to many places (Neild 34). Like her boundary-crossing characters, the writer moves between national affiliations and multinational perspectives, and has been frequently left out of the Canadian literary canon (Sadowski-Smith 126). Hospital, in short, has not enjoyed the full hospitality of Canadian literary criticism. Transnationalism and border crossing, prominent features of the writer's background, filter down to her novels, which are populated by alienated and fractured characters. Published in 1985, *Borderline* is Hospital's third novel and the first set in Canada. The

novel plays out this sense of dislocation in the borderlands between Canada and the US. Set in the midst of the Civil War in El Salvador in the 1980s and Canada's Sanctuary Movement, the novel originated in the actual discovery of dead Salvadoran refugees in a truck that had been abandoned in New Mexico after crossing the Mexico-US border. Hospital realized that there was a connection between these incidents and "the underground railway from the Rio Grande to the Canadian border" (Sadowski-Smith 127). In *Borderline*, the writer relocates another group of refugees from El Salvador to the Canadian border, the site where exclusion and hostility will collide with inclusion and hospitality. Significantly, the same two impulses which were paramount in the 1980s and that we see so clearly in *Borderline* are still fundamental to understanding contemporary responses to migration and the (un)welcoming of the Other in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

In this article I explore the multilayered space of the US-Canada border as experienced by three characters: Felicity, a historian and art curator in Boston; Gus, an "Anglais" insurance agent from Montreal; and an unnamed immigrant woman from El Salvador who is alternatively known as Dolores Marquez, La Salvadora, La Desconocida, and La Magdalena. The crossing is chronicled by Jean-Marc, Felicity's son-in-law, a piano tuner and host to the different narrative accounts in the novel. He is in charge of making sense of Felicity's and Gus's messages and telephone conversations in the aftermath of their encounter with the migrant woman and their subsequent disappearance. In this border thriller, Jean-Marc reveals how the boundary will mark Felicity and Gus forever. Both will ultimately join the ranks of the *desaparecidos*, the victims of the violence traditionally associated with Central America, as they become enmeshed in clandestine Salvadoran networks. In this article I lay out the novel's different vectors converging on the geopolitical boundary and explore the border's multiple dimensions and ontological differences. Hospital anatomizes the space of the border as a complex site of collision between and among different narratives and laws (or the absence of them). Drawing from Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Emmanuel Levinas, I claim that the border is the site of abjection as well as exception, the space that produces the figure of the *homo sacer*, in the sense that Agamben uses it. At the same time, the border is the stage of an act of hospitality, following Derrida's theorization of the concept. Both Felicity and Gus respond to a silent summons in the face of the migrant woman and, on an impulse, take her to Felicity's cottage outside Montreal. Through their hospitable act, Felicity and Gus eventually turn into figures

of the guest, homeless and persecuted, until they become the *desaparecidos* themselves, the missing ones, another illustration of the (un)dead. Thus the novel comes full circle, as it illustrates that exception is a contagious category that knows no borders or demarcations.

### I. Abjection at the Border and the Encounter with the Other

[Y]our backyard is now a border and the metaphor is now made flesh.

—Guillermo Verdecchia, *Fronteras Americanas/American Borders*

Nothing prepares the novel's accidental protagonists, Felicity and Gus, for their encounter with the Other/crosser and their initial role as accidental hosts. Felicity is on her way from Boston to Canada to find peace and quiet over the weekend at her cottage outside Montreal. Gus experiences habitual "border nervousness," but does not expect trouble. Quite to the contrary, he anticipates that the Canadian border officer would share his relief at homecoming. Both Felicity and Gus represent the type of safe crossers for whom clearing Customs is a formality. The US-Canada boundary is, after all, a less securitized border, compared to the problematic and heavily policed southern boundary. Yet, Hospital's writing reverberates with ominous echoes. In the opening pages of the novel, Felicity has a dream of being trapped in a painting and trying to escape. Her escape is described as a border checkpoint between two realities. But there is something wrong with her passport or visa and she is pasted back onto the canvas. The border-painting connection will shape Felicity's vision of her encounter with the refugee woman. To Felicity's border dream, the narrator adds these comments: "At borders, as at death and in dreams, no amount of prior planning will necessarily avail. The law of boundaries applies. In the nature of things, control is not in the hands of the traveller" (11). In Hospital's novel, border-death-dreams are threaded together in passages that imply loss of control. And indeed, powerlessness is inherent in what can be called the dynamics of the border. Borders are, after all, spaces of selection that open or close depending on the crosser, who can be rejected at the slightest provocation, as Luis Humberto Crosthwaite reminds us in *Instrucciones* (2002). Oppositional forces, deeply charged historically and culturally, are arrested at a standstill, a caesura in time and space as each crosser goes through the checkpoint (cf. Chapin 4-6). This caesura plays out the encounter between the inclusive narrative of the nation-state and its simultaneous restrictive practices. In this space of collision between ethical imperatives and national narratives, the border may mutate into what Agamben calls a "zone of indistinction," "an extra-political nowhere while

the sovereign exercises a decision” (Salter 370). The law of boundaries applies, as Hospital’s narrator cautions, but there is nothing certain as to its logic. The logic, or lack of it, may refer to the fact that the line is intermittent, as Oates writes in “Crossing.” The border works as an impenetrable system that deals out instances of exception but also examples, as Agamben explains:

[T]he exception is situated in a symmetrical position with respect to the example, with which it forms a system. Exception and example constitute the two modes by which a set tries to found and maintain its own coherence. But while the exception is . . . an *inclusive exclusion* (which thus serves to include what is excluded), the example instead functions as an *exclusive inclusion*. (21, emphasis original)

This chiasmic formulation clarifies how the crossing will work for Felicity and Gus, on one hand, and the “illegal” crossers, on the other. The former, although legal and unproblematic, will become the examples that are eventually excluded; the latter will become the exception that is included. Both example and exception will end up inhabiting a similar zone of indistinction characterized by the absence of law, where the individual is abandoned, “that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. It is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical order” (Agamben 28-29).

Initially, however, the checkpoint in *Borderline* only distinguishes between safe crossers and a suspicious refrigerated van. There is nothing extraordinary about this specific crossing, for humans and goods traverse similar lines, even if the latter find fewer difficulties than the former. However, the border authorities have been tipped that the van may be carrying “illegal” migrants, as an official later confides to Felicity, and thus perform an inspection. As the doors open, Felicity and Gus are privy to its contents: “a roiling curtain of carcasses. Steers. Guttled, obscenely lanced on thick hooks, the lapels of their slit underbellies flapping and gaping like eyelids around empty sockets, they swayed in the sun” (30). The image, while disturbing, is of the kind of perfectly safe goods regularly expedited through the border. But, as the narrator continues, there is more to the scene and different cargo inside the van: “a group of people, perhaps ten of them, men and women, huddling together from cold. They gazed out like exhumed relics of another world. Like animal things still warm and faintly bleating in the midst of an abattoir’s carnage” (30). The van holds the living, or rather the (un)dead, and the dead, in an ontological doubling right at the geopolitical border. The unreality of the vision makes Felicity think of cave dwellers, “refugees from another time and place—the

Ice Age, say, or the age of myth" (31). The association automatically primitivizes the migrants and sets up a troubling dichotomy between North Americans (portrayed as modern) and southern immigrants (portrayed as primitive). Whether envisioned as peculiar travellers or as the contemporary version of the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free," the group illustrates how "the metaphor" of the distant, southern Other, to use Guillermo Verdecchia's words in the epigraph above, has become flesh, and has appeared at Canada's doorstep.

The sudden visibility of the refugees, as Gus and Felicity register, is hard to accommodate in the formalities of border crossing. Even if Felicity keeps a file about the disappeared in Central America, on death squads and corruption, the vision seems totally out of place in a continent, as Felicity remarks, "where no one believed in the unpleasant" (31). It is a hard readjustment, for the formalities of an easy transit are overlaid with the violence peculiar to the southern border. It is not only South superimposed onto North, but also the abject-grotesque onto the pleasant, the inanimate onto the human, an alleged remote age of cave dwellers onto the present. In another context, Agamben has attributed the source of the shock immigrants introduce in the order of the modern nation-state to the fact that by breaking "the continuity between man and citizen, *nativity* and *nationality*, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis. Bringing to light the difference between birth and nation, the refugee causes the secret presupposition of the political domain—bare life—to appear for an instant within that domain" (131, emphasis original). Situated at the geopolitical boundary, the group of Salvadoran refugees illustrate the fall from just such a hyphenated continuity. They overlay the concept of the border through their own liminal identity, since, for Agamben, the refugee is "nothing less than a limit concept that radically calls into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state, from the birth-nation to the man-citizen link" (134). Their sudden appearance/birth as bare life brings forth the emergent ruptures within the nation-state.

After the migrants are "herded" (32), Hospital adds another vision within the extraordinary. Time seems to stand still, but this spell is broken when a man comes out to impound the van. When he revs the engine the carcasses begin to jostle one another in agitation: "The unfastened doors flapped to and fro, the hanging carcasses swooped up and out like playground swings. When the van gunned suddenly forward there was . . . [a] stampede of dead cattle: thump after thump, the grotesque smack of butchered flesh on pavement" (35). Such accumulation of dead flesh is the setting where Hospital situates the next crosser, this time not only in close proximity to a carcass but

inside one. As Felicity and Gus stare at the carcass nearest them, they realize it has an unzipped front like a caesarean wound around a fetus. Furthering the surreal or magic-realistic quality of the vision, they realize there is something or someone in there: "A woman. Across her forehead hung a tendril of intestine, ghoulish curl. Her knees were hunched up and her arms were crossed over her breasts like a careful arrangement in a coffin" (35-36). The scene presents a grotesque delivery at the border. The migrant woman emerges from dead, slit flesh, from a symbolic and life-producing border-space, with the ghoulish curl as a reminder of her intimacy with the womb/corpse. Felicity, however, seems to aestheticize the gore and can only think of Peruginò's *La Magdalena*.<sup>3</sup> The birth marks the inscription of different borders: the carcass opens to deliver a migrant woman right at the geopolitical boundary, thus emphasizing the correlation between body/corpse and national boundaries. It is a correlation reminiscent of that spelled out by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, where she states that the abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Hospital overlays the symbolic potential of the geopolitical border and the ritual regulation of the national body with a grotesque body opening in another representation of a bleeding wound, an *herida abierta*, in Anzaldúa's words. Revealingly, Hospital anticipates Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the border as the open wound where the "Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (3). Thus *Borderline* prefigures Anzaldúa's elaborate theory of the border-line as a paradigm of multiple crossings before border studies came into being as a field of study and research in the US.<sup>4</sup>

Mary Pat Brady has argued that as migrants are "incorporated" into the host country, they go through an "abjection machine" that metamorphoses them into something else, into "aliens," "illegals," "wetbacks," or "undocumented," and renders them "unintelligible (and unintelligent), ontologically impossible, outside the real and the human" (*Extinct Lands* 50). What Hospital tackles, however, is how abjection starts right at the border. The huddled crossers, together with the unnamed woman, are situated next to the carcass, one of the primary representations of the abject. Ontological boundaries between the living and the dead-inanimate blur as the van exposes different layers of the abject. For Kristeva, the abject is "ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated" (1), for, she argues, the abject and abjection are our safeguards, "the primers of my culture" (2). In placing the migrants next to and in

cohabitation with the carcasses, the van reveals a contagious abjection, for the corpse is the utmost manifestation of abjection. Etymologically, corpse or cadaver comes from the Latin verb *cadere*, to fall, as Kristeva notes (3). From the perspective of the host country the migrants are not physically dead but are socially dead, fallen from any social texture. The spatial contiguity between the carcasses and the migrants suggests what Agamben spells out as the act of falling (or *cadere*) from the continuity “between man and citizen, *nativity* and *nationality*.” The description of the slit flesh brings into focus the image of such discontinuity. What happens, Hospital questions, when migrants are jettisoned as abject matter from such correlations? The novel illustrates that there is no land of refuge for these migrants; there is no unconditional hospitality, just as “[o]n maps of the world, at least, there is nowhere for anyone foreign to the order of states to go, no refuge and nowhere to retreat” (Baker 20). The refugee or asylum seeker, unable to return to his or her own country of origin and transformed into an “illegal” in the target country, becomes *de facto* stateless, “a new living dead man” (Agamben 131), an updated version of the *homo sacer*, living in a blurred zone of included exclusion.

Thus the nation-state gives and takes away legal protection. As the targets of exception, the migrants are banned and abandoned in an unknown territory, on a threshold, as Agamben claims, in which “life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable” (28). Are they inside or outside the law? It is hard to say, for the law keeps them inside to extricate them from its domain. Canada, the novel reveals, is not ready to provide any form of political hospitality that does not imply the transformation of the migrant into an inanimate object. Sadowski-Smith has argued that Hospital does not acknowledge the fact that in the 1980s many Central American refugees did find sanctuary in Canada (130). Hospital's departure from the historical record, however, can be read as part of her destabilizing the monolithic version of a welcoming Canada as she unveils the deeply ingrained stereotypes of southern migrants (Roberts 201). The way the incident is chronicled in the fictional *Montreal Gazette* reflects a predominant version of Canada's vision of migrants:

*Canadian-U.S. border.* A group of illegal aliens was apprehended at the border today following an attempt to smuggle themselves into Canada in a refrigerated meat van. Two of the aliens subsequently died of hypothermia. The remainder, officials say, will be extradited back to the United States, where they had already been served deportation papers, following all necessary medical treatment.

All the aliens come from El Salvador, a spokesman said. (50)



The newspaper paragraph is paradigmatic in its portrayal of hostility: migrants are represented as “illegal aliens” with the agency to smuggle themselves into the country. Their apprehension is followed by extradition, always mediated by the humane medical treatment. Extradition means that the immigrants are abandoned to their lot in the US, which, in turn, will banish them to El Salvador, a place which, in Gus’s assessment, is more terrible than the fear of slow death through refrigeration (108).

Transformed into witnesses to this border birth, Felicity and Gus automatically react as responsible hosts/parents and settle the immigrant woman in one of the cars. After doing so, they go through their own crossings. The immigration officer describes the particulars of the border incident to Felicity: the authorities were tipped off from Boston to watch out for a group of migrants that had been served deportation papers and were looking for sanctuary in Canada. The conflicts of the South are spreading to the North and Central America appears at Canada’s doorstep. Nothing, the border official claims, will stop the flow: “They’ll cross twenty states . . . bribe their way out of anything” (38). The official even ventures the alleged causes for migration: “Fear of death, they try to tell you, but it’s green stuff they want” (38). The fear of death, in fact, came from the Civil War that ravaged El Salvador in the 1980s. Since the country was a US ally, refugees were often deported. The Sanctuary movement emerged in the 1980s to allow the entrance of refugees across the Mexico-US border. If migrants were served deportation papers, like the group in the novel, the networks transported them to Canada. Once in the country, the refugees would apply for asylum only if they entered the country legally. Entering the country illegally, like the group of refugees in the novel, meant a speedy return to the US if they were caught (Sadowski-Smith 127-128). Hence the guard’s description of his role in the game: “Round them up” (38) (like cattle), if he can catch them.

When Felicity’s scrutiny begins, she finds that her destination, a cottage outside Montreal, is immediately questionable because of her point of departure, Boston, the city from which the refrigerated van departed. Even if viewed as an American and as a safe crosser, Felicity falls into the hermeneutics of suspicion that is inherent to border crossing (Chapin 5) because she was born in India. She is, indeed, challenging the “Border Catechism No. 1”: “Question: What shall constitute a legitimate and acceptable human being” (Hospital 40). “Answer: A person, preferably of Anglo-Saxon stock, with the decency to have been born in a country familiar to the presiding official, and respectable in his eyes” (40). This is

the first instance that even distant or remote contact or association with the migrant Other makes Felicity a suspect, and that example and exception are not too far apart. Once both Gus and Felicity are waved through, the narrative voice details the most apparent changes and differences the eye can list on the other side of the border: interstates mutate into *autoroutes*, miles become kilometres. Other changes, however, are intangible (42). It is these other changes that the rest of the novel will unfold. The trio has finally and successfully crossed a geopolitical boundary which will reveal complex and far-reaching consequences. The boundary, Felicity and Gus will find out, can repeat itself endlessly and unexpectedly as the dynamics of border suspicion are turned loose.

## II. The Reckoning of the Other and Border Indistinctions

The Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question.

—Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy”

I do not think of the notion of the ‘border’ as an empirical quantity or a fixed denomination, or indeed in the spatial sense of the term. Borders are always within, inside social space, which is not smooth, but is multi-linear, discontinuous and punctured (*troué*).

—Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions*

Levinas claims that there is a silent request in the face of the Other that awakes one’s responsibility towards him or her. For the philosopher, the subject is unique and irreplaceable in his or her obligation or duty, an absolute responsibility for the Other and for the Other’s welfare. This taking charge stands before any other commitment; it is asymmetrical and nonreciprocal. The relation between the I and the you is not one of reciprocity, but there is an inherent “inequality, a dissymmetry” (*Of God* 150). In *Borderline* this reckoning crystallizes in an act of spontaneous hospitality in spite of the abject birth witnessed by Felicity and Gus. Felicity and Gus debate over whose car would be less suspicious for safely accommodating the woman. Gus is Canadian and born there too, but his nervousness makes Felicity suggest her car instead. Gus picks up the woman, “the soft bundle and cradled it against his chest as though it were his first-born, the one he had never held” (37). Significantly, the woman is portrayed as a newborn, and Gus, immediately transformed into a surrogate father, proceeds with the rituals of welcoming her into the world: “He brushed the matted black

hair from her cheeks, her head in the crook of his left elbow. . . . Delicately, like a nervous father during a first bottle feeding, he let the whiskey trickle over her tongue” (46). Like a devoted father, Gus holds her head against his shoulder, rocking back and forth with her. It is the beginning of his summons and his ensuing transformation into a responsible father figure, a *pater* unequivocally associated with a superior moral stand as opposed to the infantilization of the adult migrant woman. This new relationship is therefore complex and problematic from the start, and replicates the hierarchies inherent to the hospitable act: the host is portrayed as *pater* and the guest is depicted as a child.

The automatic and unconscious acts of hospitality of Felicity and Gus bring to the fore the discrepancy between what Derrida calls the Law and the laws of hospitality. The Law of universal, unlimited, and unconditional hospitality clashes with the laws of conditional and limited hospitality designed to maintain the stable social order within the community. Under the laws of hospitality, the Law would itself be illegal, “outside the law, like a lawless law” (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 79). Whereas the Law of hospitality is premised on blurring the lines between self and Other, the laws serve to mark the limits of how the stranger can be received. Inadvertently, Felicity and Gus are guided by the Law of hospitality, by an imperative to respond to the interpellation of the Other, as Derrida describes it: “absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner . . . but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them” (*Of Hospitality* 25, emphasis original). By receiving and sheltering the Other, Felicity’s and Gus’s sense of self is immediately called into question. In the process, all the routines that structured their lives will be left behind. Hospitality, Judith Still writes, is more than a legal contract or a verbal agreement, for it is “overlaid with crucial affective elements” (12), and the guest and the host may be utterly changed by the experience. As Felicity says, it is a lifetime decision that you cannot reverse or undo (59). Through their hospitable act, the migrant woman, “categorised as ‘outside,’ as not necessarily *by right* or legal contract, part of the ‘inside,’ is temporarily brought within” (Still 11). The consequences of this bringing within are far-reaching, and offer a chiasmic revision of the hospitable act: not only is the outside brought within, but something that was categorized as “inside” or legitimate (Gus, Felicity), as by right or legal contract, is also brought without. This being brought without is subtle and does not manifest itself openly at first, but will create a powerful conceptual crossing in the novel.

The cottage that was supposed to provide peace and quiet turns into the space of hospitality in the novel. This physical space of hospitality, however, contrasts with the fictions each host creates in order to integrate the woman. Felicity takes Father Bolduc to the cottage and offers a hesitant narrative of the migrant as Mary Magdalene and as a victim of rape. Similarly, as Gus returns home and, at least initially, gives the border incident a happy ending, he imagines what the woman's life will turn out to be: at the priest's intercession, the woman—virginal in spirit—would receive a work permit; she would not be deported, and would marry a doctor; her son would become Prime Minister or Supreme Court judge and then would die after a full life (70). These fantasies of inclusion, however, turn out to be narratives of sameness where Felicity and Gus project their own subjectivities. Neither host seems ready to host the woman's radical difference unconditionally, either physically—they abandon her in the cottage—or narratively. Their hospitality, therefore, falls into the realm of the limited and conditional welcome of the Other. The laws of conditional hospitality finally determine and undermine the Law of hospitality.

When Felicity returns to the cottage with Father Bolduc, she finds that the woman has disappeared. In Felicity's assessment, she might have been rescued by friends, relatives, a church group, "something like the old Underground Railroad for runaway slaves" (126). Significantly, the novel suggests, nineteenth-century slaves are the immigrants of the twentieth century. Both, slaves and immigrants, seek Canada as a land of refuge against slavery or deportation. Similarly, the geopolitical boundary separating the US from Canada, like the nineteenth-century boundary separating slavery from freedom, is elusive, and may become manifest anywhere, anytime. Neither the migrant woman nor the "legal" crossers will be safe from the recurrence of this repeating line. After her disappearance from the cottage she becomes a ghostly presence for Felicity and Gus. Felicity imagines her sitting on her passenger seat "[w]ith a flamenco swirl of her torn black skirts" (88). The fact that flamenco does not belong in El Salvador may be another indication that Felicity does not know how to fully accommodate the dimensions of difference the woman brings into her world, just as how, upon seeing her, Felicity can only think of her as the embodiment of Peruginio's Magdalene. How far-reaching is Felicity's commitment to the Other? Felicity is relieved to hear the spectre of the woman say that even if she is "inconvenient" she will not "coerce" (88). Yet Felicity feels the threat of the guest taking over the host, now transformed into a disquieting ghost

threatening to gobble her up (88).<sup>5</sup> The spectrality of the guest respects no boundaries, and Gus hears the woman's scream in the middle of his work routine. Like Felicity, he also projects his subjectivity on to the migrant, and thinks he hears her admonition not to abandon her.

But the woman is being tracked down by a host of other groups, as Leon-Angelo, a refugee, explains to Felicity. For the migrant woman, as well as for all of those like Felicity and Gus who come into contact with her or try to protect her at some point, there exists no Border with capital B. Crossing the border in *Borderline* does not equal safety, since the border fragments itself into unpredictable border encounters repeated in different locations and at multiple times. This fragmentation of the physical border into myriads of boundaries makes it unexpectedly unstable, and allows us to envision a borderspace that is explicitly present nowhere and yet can make itself evident anywhere. The consequences of this recurrent line provide instances of what Jean-Marc enigmatically calls "the law of boundaries" (11) at the beginning of the novel and give the novel its thriller-like quality. The law of boundaries becomes the law of indistinction, as the principles of example and exception become blurred. Similarly, the two sets of characters at the beginning of the novel become impossible to tell apart. The migrant woman is a fugitive, but so are Felicity and Gus; she is a "guest" but so too become her two former "hosts"; she is banned and abandoned, but so will be the formerly safe crossers.

There will be no more home for Gus and Felicity. Felicity is eventually placed under constant surveillance by two alleged FBI agents who materialize in her office and ask her to identify the photo of a disfigured woman whose body, they falsely claim, was near the cottage she owns. Her name is Dolores Marquez, alias La Salvadora, who was under government protection (134). The fact that Felicity has a collection of newspaper clippings about Central American migrants and that she was driving behind the refrigerated van makes her automatically a suspect to these so-called investigators. The two men are especially interested in a clipping about a group of migrants jumping off a bridge in Texas when a freight train ploughed through the railway trestle. Some of the survivors managed to escape and ended up in the refrigerated truck at the Canadian border (138). But Felicity is also contacted by Sister Gabriel, a member of the Sanctuary movement. As in the nineteenth century, the line separating slavery from freedom can repeat itself unexpectedly, whenever nineteenth-century slave catchers or twentieth-century FBI agents and immigration authorities manage to catch up with fugitives. But in the 1980s, the FBI agents in the novel turn out to be a cover for illicit operations,

and the novel takes pains in identifying the different groups—extreme right or left, or simple death squads—which weave an inescapable circle of terror around the characters. Felicity is right in her assessment that she will never be safe. The feeling of insecurity intensifies after her interview with Leon-Angelo, who used to be legal in the US but is now threatened with deportation to an unavoidable death in El Salvador. Even if “Felicity had crossed more borders on more continents than anyone would want to keep a file on” (11), as Jean-Marc remarks at the outset of the novel, towards the end of the novel she feels overwhelmed by an encroaching border that seems to have travelled to the heart of Boston. Significantly, during her conversation with Leon-Angelo, the narrative voice depicts her drawing a thin line between herself and Leon-Angelo (205). Her efforts to distance herself are ultimately unsuccessful, however, for in having the conversation she has already implicated herself in Boston’s secret immigrant network.

Even if Felicity wishes she had not crossed the border when she did, she finds herself in the midst of a border nightmare, an expanding site of exception where no rule of law applies, everyone is suspect, and nobody is safe. Trapped within this lawless site, Felicity, Gus, and Dolores each embody the figure of the *homo sacer* since the three become abandoned beings that live outside the law. There is no sanctuary for Felicity or Gus, just as there is no sanctuary for the migrants after the border incident, just as there was no sanctuary for the original group in Texas. There is no waking up into the past before crossing the border. Even if Felicity wants to convince herself that all this was about a painting, about Perugino’s rendition of *La Magdalena*, border realities drag her into a different side of the real, one of bodies piled up in ditches and garbage dumps. None of it, Leon-Angelo admits to Felicity, is possible. “None of it’s real. But it happens” (211). This sense of encroaching reality catches up with both. Leon-Angelo is finally turned over to immigration authorities to be deported, and Felicity is last seen going into her apartment before the building burns down.

Similarly, there is no sanctuary for Gus. Abandoned by his family, he starts living in his car and ends up taking quarters in shabby boarding houses. Unsurprisingly, and given his failure at risk assessment, he quits his job as an insurance agent and takes a dishwashing job, the kind of position traditionally filled by undocumented workers. He eventually finds Dolores in a restaurant kitchen. Gus finally becomes fully responsible for her. Following Jean-Marc’s instructions, he tries to drive her across the border to the safety of New York. At some point the car is smashed and

charred with two unidentified bodies inside. Jean-Marc and Kathleen, Gus' daughter, imagine Gus still running errands of mercy across the border, a Robin Hood in a Chevy, a borderline saint. Felicity and Gus become the absent ones, *los desaparecidos*, another version of the undead, just as the group of immigrants inside the refrigerated van. *Los desaparecidos* rings with irreality, for, as Kathleen reasons, "This isn't Latin America. Things happen in Latin America that couldn't happen anywhere else" (283). This discrepancy between the assurances of the nation-state and the factual eruption of violence marks the ultimate conceptual crossing of the novel: the strangeness of the South is brought within and South overlies North. Here lies the chiasitic work of the border: it approximates the alien at the same time that it defamiliarizes the immediate. The violence of El Salvador feels strangely present in an apartment building in Boston and on the lonely roads of upstate New York. There is no respite and no sanctuary, no place of hospitality in the face of this spreading violence. Conversely, the US and Canada feel strangely remote, embodying promises of safety and asylum neither country can keep. In her rethinking of national borders, *Hospital* shows how the imaginary of the modern world cracks. Concepts like refugee, migrant, asylum, and hospitality are pulled apart for inspection as if undergoing a conceptual checkpoint, a border crossing where received meanings collapse. *Hospital* manages to bring the border within. As a consequence, the imagined communities and narrations of the US and Canada are disrupted by a borderland subjectivity and an unpredictable border that create zones of indistinction. Demarcations, sides, and binaries dissolve through the power of juxtaposition. Stable and monolithic identities, or at least the illusion of such stability, disappear.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Significantly, the novel was written in the aftermath of the 1980 Quebec referendum on sovereignty-association, which reinforced a political boundary within Canada.
- 2 The term "borderscape" refers to a "zone of multiple actors and multiple bodies" (Kumar

- Rajaram and Grundy-Warr xxix). Similarly, Chiara Brambilla argues that borderscapes are “multidimensional and mobile constructions” (Pöttsch).
- 3 La Magdalena appears as a projection of Felicity, just as Felicity herself appears, in Seymour's assessment, as an idea of his.
  - 4 Margarita Cota-Cárdenas' novella *Puppet* (1985) similarly anticipates Anzaldúa's identity revision in *Borderlands*.
  - 5 In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida claims that the absence of identity, the empirical invisibility of the Other, accounts for its “spectral aura” (111).

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