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Cultures of Welcome: What Odysseus Can Teach Us About Hospitality

Caroline Wiedmer
Franklin University Switzerland

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1. ***Prologue***

In the summer of 2022, in the waning months of COVID-19 and some four months after Russia had invaded Ukraine, I found myself at a conference in Bosnia Herzegovina at the Memorial Centre in Srebrenica, the site of the massacre perpetrated by the Bosnian Serb forces in 1995 roughly one month before the Dayton Peace Accord was signed at the end of the Bosnian war. In his opening speech, Emir Suljagić, the director of the Center and himself a child witness to the massacre, said he envied the Ukrainians because despite being invaded and subjected to the ongoing war, Ukraine was at least acknowledged in the global media as part of Europe, and Ukrainian refugees were being welcomed all over Europe and given the kind of unconditional asylum that enabled a dignified life. Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), by contrast, had not been shown the same respect and aid in the early to mid-1990s, not during the siege of Sarajevo and not in the months leading up to the massacre in Srebrenica: those fleeing, he concluded, were not white enough and altogether too Muslim to be seen as Europeans.

Suljagić's remarks echo some of the debates currently underway in Switzerland, about the different kinds of welcome bestowed upon successive refugee groups fleeing turmoil in their respective countries of origin in recent years. Not all refugee groups in Switzerland, it turns out, have been offered similar largesse in the past; and of course, this raises questions: why are different groups of asylum seekers, such as people fleeing war in Bosnia, Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine treated differently? Are the motives indeed racist or sectarian, as Suljagić suggests? How are asylum regimes aligned with ideals of nationhood and humanitarianism, the latter of which has long been a pillar of Switzerland's national self-understanding? How can we think of welcome cultures as extensions of the stories and images that circulate nationally and internationally? What role do geopolitical histories and relations play and how do they express themselves? And how, precisely, do welcome cultures enable crucial aspects such as education? If we think of storytelling as powered by the differing concerns of conditional and unconditional hospitality as outlined in some of Jacques Derrida's work, how are these two modes of welcome different from one another and who are the stakeholders involved?[1]

This article is an *essai* in the proper French sense of the word: an attempt to reflect on questions such as these which have of late coalesced around the notion of cultures of welcome. This topic is itself fuelled by different definitions and notions of hospitality, long a concern in ethics and political philosophy which itself builds on the archaic concept of *xenia*, translated intriguingly as both the hospitable and the foreigner, and figuring as central topoi more than two millennia ago in some of the central Greek texts handed down to us. I hope to use these questions and the texts and imaginaries they shape as perch to reflect on forms of hospitality and welcome as a symptom of larger geopolitical forces that influence nation- and community-building, particularly in Switzerland.

To set up the ideas around conditional and unconditional hospitality, I begin my analysis with the origin story of hospitality, Homer's *Odyssey*. I follow that with a consideration of Plato's use of the figure of the foreigner in his record of Socrates' trial and Derrida's deployment of this

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[1] Derrida develops the question of hospitality mostly in the following texts: (1) Anne Dufourmantelle and Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Asks Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Jacques. Derrida, *Adieu to Emmmwei Levina*s, trans. P.-A. Brault &. M. Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. R. Kearney, M. Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 65-83; Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality," Angeloki, 1999, 5, pp. 3-18; Jacques Derrida, «The Principle of Hospitality," in *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby, (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 66-69; and Oerrida "Hospitality," in *Acts of Religion*, edited and with an introduction by Gil Anidjar (New York, London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 358-420.

ancient text in his theorizing on hospitality in the late 1990s in Paris. The second part brings us to the present and asks how this notion of unconditional hospitality is mirrored in the so-called Status-S ("S" for *Schutz*, or protection) which is offered to people fleeing the war in Ukraine and which has prompted the widespread current discussions about the overall fairness, and putative racisms of the Swiss asylum system. My focus in analyzing the S-status is on the extent to which it enables its holders to continue dignified lives. Since what is offered in terms of welcome is often tied to the way a people is perceived I also consider how Ukraine has been imagined in the post-Soviet era. In so doing my goal is to argue that our imaginaries of countries and their relations to one another—i.e. the level on which ideas of national and supranational relations are negotiated--might be a more useful way to frame the current discussion about the relative fairness of the asylum system; it might just be that within another epistemic framing, the S-status can be read as a corrective to the current asylum system in Switzerland.

2. *Xenia, or Hospitality*

One way to think about border crossings from one political realm to another is that they constitute heightened moments of storytelling and story reception both for those seeking refuge and for those granting it. The question of how political entities welcome foreigners is not new of course. If we go back a few millennia, we see that the question of *Xenia*, or hospitality, also often translated as guest-friendship, is considered a moral obligation and runs as a prominent thread through the *Odyssey*. Odysseus, who crossed several borders after the Trojan War on his ten-year trek back to his home in Ithaca, asks at one of the last stations on his journey after he is washed up on Scheria, home to Princess Nausicaa: "What is this country I have come to now? ... Are all the people wild and violent or good, hospitable, and god-fearing?"[2] Odysseus's question about the make-up of the people who will decide on his fate can be conceptualized from a modern perspective as a question about the narrative context of the realm he is about to enter, and the characters and belief systems that narratives have shaped. He is asking how the realm has constructed itself through stories, what sorts of stories are told, and what sorts of imaginaries these stories have created. Most importantly he wants to know whether he, who belongs to a certain kind of story world, can fit in and find a place among the country's particular stock of stories, and indeed be recognized by his would-be hosts as someone who fits in. His questions are meaningful within the context of ancient Greek *xenia*, a religious obligation expressed in rituals of hospitality that involve food and drink, baths and gifts, and shelter and protection. As a stranger then, ignorant of the local customs and the local belief system, and on the textual level Odysseus asks specifically: do its people hold with the stories of the Gods, and thus with the precepts of *xenia*, or do they tell unknown stories, that might not include instructions for the kind of hospitality he is familiar with and that would render the hosts "wild and violent," and hence dangerous? And, even if the locals do belong to a community which shares the same stories about *xenia*, do they adhere to its tenets?

Of course, these questions also refer to the host country, to the stories they tell about different sorts of foreigners, to the customs and laws they have built around their welcome, and to the way the negotiation between the cosmologies of foreigners and natives is conducted. As Odysseus weaves his way from Circe's doorstep to that of Calypso and on to the Phaeacians on his homeward journey to Ithaca, where a band of suitors have installed themselves like locusts in his house, vying for his wife Penelope, we understand that one central strand of the *Odyssey* is a demonstration of the various registers of hospitality for both hosts and guests. Until he reaches Ithaca, Odysseus gives us the perspective of the wanderer in need of hospitality; now, in this last part of the epic, he presents the host's perspective: when he finally arrives home in Ithaca, disguised

[2] Homer, *The Odyssey*. Translated by Emily Wilson. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018, 6:19-21.

as a beggar so he can pass unhindered by suitors, he is confronted by the rash Ctesippus, one of Penelope's suitors, mocking the rituals of hospitality by throwing an ox's hoof at him. Disguise, in fact, is part of the way the Gods can test whether a mortal adheres to the good kinds of xenia required by Zeus in this world; part of what keeps mortals tied to the custom is the belief that deities can appear as humble strangers to test their moral rectitude. Odysseus in this scene performs just this conceit, lifting himself somewhat precariously, but effectively, close to the Gods. Questions such as the ones posed in ancient Greece by Odysseus, anxious about his welcome as well as his position as host, and about clashing stories and colliding belief systems, resurface some 300-400 years later in classical Athens in the dialogues of Plato, albeit from a somewhat different viewpoint. In a series of seminars on hospitality held in Paris in 1996, Derrida reminds us of a scene in Plato's *Apology of Socrates,* one of four dialogues in which Plato recounts the trial of his teacher Socrates, which would ultimately end in his mentor's death by hemlock.[3] The stated charges against Plato are two-fold: "corrupting the young" and "not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other *daimonia* that are novel" to Athens.[4] In narrative terms, then, Socrates' crime is that he tampered with the cosmology of the times, with its strict hierarchy that placed the gods at the very top, followed by a structured hierarchy of mortals—a design that was mirrored in Athens society. To introduce new characters—the *daimonia* who figured somewhere below the Gods but above mere mortals—into this mix proved explosive. The charges, as summed up in the words of Plato's Socrates, who speaks of himself in the third person, are, accordingly, of an even more dire nature than the ones actually levelled against him: "Socrates is committing an injustice, in that he inquires into things below the earth and in the sky; and makes the weaker argument the stronger; and teaches others to follow his example."[5] This charge concerns not only shaking up the power structure of the pantheon and the societal hierarchies that follow from it but the reach and import of mortal knowledge itself. The realms "below the earth and in the sky," though we moderns like to think of them as constructed by the human imagination, belong—within the cosmology of the ancient Greeks— firmly to the Gods, and are not accessible to mere mortals, certainly not those who would attempt to introduce new players, change the power of arguments and teach others to follow.

Part of the way we know has to do with the way we speak. Plato's *Apology* speaks to the paradoxical situation refugees find themselves in linguistically with relation to the law by featuring the figure of the foreigner as a conceit for Socrates to make his rhetorical point; to ask, as Derrida puts it, the "question of that which is foreign."[6] In his address in *The Apology* to the 54 jurors who are to judge him, Socrates announces that in contrast to the liars who accuse him, he will speak the truth, but without the elegant rhetoric or beautiful language of the sophist. Rather, he will use the same language people have heard him use so often in the agora, the central marketplace. He declares further that he is a stranger to the language of the court, to the rhetoric of law, to the processes of accusations and defence, and that as such he stands before the tribune and the tribunals *like a foreigner*. "For that is the fact of the matter." Socrates says," I appear before court the first time, at the age of seventy, so I am entirely unfamiliar with (foreign to) the customary way of speaking. Just like you would forgive me if I really were a foreigner, the fact that I would converse with the accent and language in which I was raised."[7] The subtlety of this rhetorical

[3] Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, *Anne Dufourmantelle Asks Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans by Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
[4] Plato, Aristophanes et al, *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato's "Euthyphro", "Apology of Socrates", and "Crito" and Aristophanes' "Clouds"*, Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1998, trans by Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, introduced by Thomas G. West, p. 73. See also "Socrates," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 16 Sept. 2005, Doug Lindner, "The Trial of Socrates, "Univ. of Missouri-Kansas City Law School 2002, and Stone, I.F. (1988). *The Trial of Socrates*. New York: Little, Brown. *Why Socrates Died: Dispelling the Myths* by Robin Waterfield, Norton, 2009.
[5] Plato, "Apology of Socrates" in *Four Texts on Socrates,* p. 17.
[6] Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, p. 13.
[7] Plato, "Apology of Socrates" in *Four Texts on Socrates,* p. 17.

framing, as Derrida observes, allows Socrates to accuse the would-be arbiters of his fate of extending him less courtesy than they show foreigners in the context of the good kind of *xenia* we learned about from Odysseus.

More than a clever accusation, the figure of the foreigner becomes a trope for someone whose thinking is neither insulated by the habit or customs of law of a given political entity nor by the entrenched political order and social hierarchies of the day. Socrates dons the garb of a foreigner to question the very epistemic norms that governed Athens at the time by extending the realms of inquiry "below the earth and in the sky." The injustice Plato's Socrates says he is accused of, in a nutshell, is the danger foreigners are often perceived to pose to a nation's imaginary. The anxiety over the narratives refugees import, frequently recited in languages most inhabitants of the host country do not know, or based on religions or ideologies not shared by the mainstream, often find their way into the visual rhetoric of political posters—as seen for instance in the poster by the Swiss People's Party "Maria instead of Sharia"[8] or into laws, such as the minaret law in Switzerland, or the Burka law--understood by some to emerge decades later to offer counter-histories to a country's self-representations of humanitarianism.[9] And this, in the end, is also one of the perceived threats posed by foreigners who enter any country: that they will bring with them new kinds of imaginaries in religion, law, or customs that often coexist uneasily with the national narratives; "foreign" narratives that might even threaten to upend "native" ones.[10]

Then as now, several contradictory meanings, desires and anxieties can be effectively projected onto the figure of the foreigner. Referring to Socrates' claims that he felt like a foreigner in the courtroom, Derrida points out that whatever Socrates in his guise as a foreigner might represent to us, actual foreigners are exactly in the situation he describes when asking for hospitality in a host country: typically not proficient in the tongue of the new country, and often ignorant of the language of the court and of its laws, in which the obligation of hospitality, the right to asylum, its norms, its borders, and its police are constructed. This uneven match between foreigners and the legal institution of a country constitutes, according to Derrida, an initial act of violence, because the host (the king, the realm, the courts, the state, the nation) forces strangers to translate their life stories into the language of the host. Here, for Derrida, the question of hospitality begins. He asks:

Should we demand from a foreigner before, and so that, we take him in, that he understand us, that he speak our language, with all that this expression entails, and in all its possible extensions? If he already were to speak our language with all this implies, if we already shared everything that

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[8] See the image for instance in an article from 2009: http://www.rhetorik.ch/Aktuell/09/02_10/index.html, accessed March 2023.

[9] The so-called Bergier report, for instance, is a controversial study published in 2001 on the treatment of Jewish refugees seeking refuge in Switzerland. See https://www.uek.ch/de/schlussbericht/synthese/uekd.pdf, accessed February 28, 2023.

[10] A closer look at the backstory of *The Apology,* for instance, shows some of the same political struggles over the meaning of democracy that we see today in the United States, one of Athens' modern-day successors. Sceptical of Plato's depiction of the trial, and of Socrates, his mentor, the journalist I.F. Stone, author of *The Trial of Socrates,* considers possible reasons, other than those charged, for which Socrates might have been put to death in his seventieth year after a lifetime of teaching on the streets of Athens, a place where the exercise of free speech was much like breathing. "I believe," Stone says in an interview, "the case against Socrates was political and that the charge of corrupting the youth was based on a belief – and considerable evidence – that he was undermining their faith in Athenian democracy…. Those are the realities his (Plato's) *Apology* was calculated to hide." Seen in this light, Plato's Socrates, in presenting himself as a foreigner unversed in the language of the courts, might be read to encompass the language of democracy itself, and the final verdict an indictment of his—and Plato's—anti-democratic stance. In Stone's reading of the trial, some 2400 years after the fact, the jurors of the trial were defending not the pantheon, but democracy itself. See I.F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates*, Anchor Press: 1989. http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/socrates/ifstoneinterview.html, accessed February 20, 2023.

is shared with a common language, would the foreigner still be a foreigner, and could one still speak of hospitality and asylum when referring to him?[11]

This fundamental paradox in conditional asylum—that we expect foreigners to be able to ask for hospitality and defend their bid within a legal and social system using a language, and by implication a societal and legal code, of hospitality and a national imaginary, which if they knew it, would mark them as a non-stranger—is an aporia that typically underpins modern asylum regimes today. A further fundamental paradox Derrida points to is the difference between absolute and conditional hospitality. "Absolute hospitality," he states, requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names.[12]

Absolute hospitality, in Derrida's definition, is granted even before the foreigner's name is known, thereby obviating the need for narratives on the part of an individual. He or she would be granted asylum, and legal status, on the strength of belonging to a certain circumscribed group alone. To speak in the context of the S-status, which comes as close as any nation will allow to this kind of `absolute hospitality,` he or she is admitted on the strength of being in Ukraine at the time of war, but not on the strength of being a particular kind of individual, with a heritage; an individual 'with a family name'. The reason this works in the case of absolute, or as I will call it unconditional asylum is that both paradoxes are essentially resolved: the asylum seeker is not required to speak in the tongue of a non-foreigner in a court as though he or she were a native, and the pact or reciprocity is solved on the supranational level through Switzerland's participation in regulations agreed on with the European Union, rather than on the national level through an agreement between state and individual which is the typical way. On this political level then the trust it takes for such an agreement is between political entities. At the same time, this trust, and the alliances that spring from them, also speak to the legitimation of borders, and hence nations. This brings us to the level of geopolitics.

3. *Conditional versus Unconditional Hospitality*

Unconditional asylum, that is asylum based on foreign relations and geopolitical circumstances such as war, and *conditional* asylum based on an individual's plight, such as personal persecution, one of the main definitions of a refugee in the 1952 Geneva Convention, have fundamentally different goals.[13] Conditional hospitality which is the kind individuals receive when they are fleeing their countries not because of war, but because they are personally persecuted, is embedded within a whole host of stories that have regulatory functions. These are the stories told by the asylum seeker about their particular circumstances, the events that made them flee their home countries and their journeys; they are then translated and recorded by officials at the asylum centres, accompanied by their own interpretations of the stories to serve as bases for legal decisions by more senior officials; and they end up condensed into decisions handed down by state representatives, which determine the fate of the displaced person. This relatively contained circle of stories passed on from refugees to administrators to lawmakers and back again operates within larger informal story cycles: information shared by refugees and traffickers on what to include and what to omit in their stories to achieve asylum; stories told among case workers at the asylum centres about what sounds

[11] Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, p. 29.
[12] Ibid, p. 25.
[13] See the definitions of refugees in the text of the Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees of 1951 and the 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees in the UNHCR document, https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10, accessed March 9, 2023.

authentic and what does not; stories told by the laws and regulations of the respective asylum regimes; and stories, finally, recounted in the larger culture about refugees: who they are, and what they potentially bring to, or take away from, the communities in which they hope to make a new life. This cultural level is also where anxieties about race, religion and gender are located.

Each of these linked levels of storytelling—the personal, the bureaucratic, the legal, the political, and the cultural—is informed by its intents and interests, its own legal and moral codes, and its histories, authorities, and ideological underpinnings. And quite often these linked narrative contexts are contradictory and controversial, sitting at uneasy angles to one another, and yet making up a whole that determines the situated experience a refugee will have in a given country, at a given time. To make things even more complicated, these narrative clusters never arise in a vacuum; they all have their specific historical contexts, which have evolved, often over centuries, in the way foreigners and their countries have been thought about, talked about, represented, rendered invisible or visible, profited from or damaged by, legalized or criminalized in larger national, and supranational contexts.[14]

It is at this national and supranational level where I would situate the story the S-Status tells; a narrative that is concerned with historical legacy, and a self-understanding of nationhood in alliance, or in conflict with, other nations. To tell stories on this level then is a complex business; the analysis of the S-status as used in Switzerland and the EU provides an insight into this complexity. The S-status, in the books since the war in Kosovo, was first activated in Switzerland and in the EU in the spring of 2022 to grant asylum seekers fleeing the war in Ukraine temporary legal status without their having to go through the arduous and often unsuccessful asylum process reserved for other asylum seekers, and without overwhelming the asylum system.[15] The S-status is not a novel legal instrument; in fact, it was first created in 1998 in response to the very wars Suljagić was referring to in the former Yugoslavia, and particularly in Kosovo when tens of thousands of people seeking refuge threatened to overwhelm the Swiss asylum system.[16] But the important thing to keep in mind about the S-status is that (while it is still somewhat conditional as it refers exclusively to Ukrainians, or people living in Ukraine when the war began) the condition of this asylum does *not rest with the individual*, but rather with *the country of origin*, Ukraine, and the circumstance that it was invaded by Russia. This distinction means that individual stories, which are influenced in part by identity markers, such as religion, race, gender, age, or the circumstances under which a person arrives in Switzerland--the latter important because of the first entry clause in the Dublin Regulations, which mandates that most refugees must seek asylum in the European country they first set foot in—become somewhat irrelevant to the question of asylum.[17]

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[14] Caroline Wiedmer, "Forced Entanglements: Stories of Expulsion, Sovereign Power and Bare Life," *Kulturwissenschaftliche Zeitschrift,* de Gruyter, vol. 2, 2019, p. 73.

[15] The S-status enables a swift reaction on the part of the Swiss federal government to an acute rise in the numbers of asylum seekers due to war in a country; it grants temporary legal status until the immediate crisis has passed, without overly taxing the asylum system. It also comes with the permit to work, and financial support for housing and health insurance. See also https://www.fluechtlingshilfe.ch/themen/asyl-in-der-schweiz/aufenthaltsstatus/status-s for further information on the S-status, provided by Flüchtlingshilfe Schweiz, accessed February 20, 2023. See also the Swiss Asylum Code Article 4 and 66 ff for the legal language on the S-status, https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/1999/358/en, accessed February 25, 2023.

[16] While the S-status was introduced into law back in the late nineties, it came too late for those fleeing the circumstances that had, three years earlier, led to the massacre in Srebrenica, and in the end, its activation was deemed unnecessary because the war in Kosovo came to an end in 1999 and the numbers of asylum-seekers decreased thereafter. For an overview of precise data and practices concerning the different groups of asylum seekers over the last four decades in Switzerland, see Stephan Parak, *Asylpraxis der Schweiz von 1979 bis 2019,* published by the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM). https://www.bj.admin.ch/ejpd/de/home/aktuell/mm.msg-id-80176.html, accessed February 20, 2023. See also https://www.fluechtlingshilfe.ch/themen/asyl-in-der-schweiz/aufenthaltsstatus/status-s for further information on the S-status, provided by Flüchtlingshilfe Schweiz, accessed February 20, 2023.

[17] The Dublin Regulations were originally established as the Dublin Convention in 1990 and implemented in 1997. It is now in its third iteration, the Dublin Regulations III, in force since January 2014.

I would argue that it is because it is situated on the supra-national level, and hence represents an alliance with the EU, and thus the developing alliance of the EU with Ukraine, the S-status comes with generous conditions. The holders of this status are not only granted unconditional residency status for the duration of the war but health care, housing and a modest stipend to cover living costs as is the case for all refugees who are granted asylum. Most importantly, education on all levels (as is the case with other people seeking *conditional* refuge and recognized as refugees and thus granted either temporary or permanent asylum) is part of the package: children on the primary and secondary levels (from ca 7-16 years of age) are admitted into special classes soon after their arrival and integrated into the regular classes when their language skills permit. There are several pathways after S-status holders finish the ninth grade, which in Switzerland marks the end of compulsory education: on the one hand, they can theoretically take up an apprenticeship, often supported by additional flanking measures, on the other, and again theoretically, they can pursue a path that leads to university education, the so-called Gymnasium. For Ukrainian students who arrive in Switzerland with the equivalent of a university-relevant high school diploma, the path is at least partially open to university education, albeit only for those with advanced language competency (usually a C1) in one of the Swiss languages, and already gained ECTS credits in a home university.[18]

Because schooling in Ukraine that leads to a high school diploma includes only 11 years of education while the equivalent schooling in Switzerland lasts at least 12, and quite often 13 years, the Ukrainian diploma is only partially recognized. To compensate for this and following the Lisbon Convention, students from Ukraine can have 120 ECTS credits already granted by a university in Ukraine (so roughly half of a BA which is usually 240 ECTS credits) count as their 12th year. For those who do not already have the ECTS credits required, there are several possibilities. In Zurich for instance, there is a step program which combines remote learning with *in situ* language learning; clearly, the experience with COVID-19 has left an architecture of remote learning platforms in its path that can now be used on the one hand to enable students who had not yet gained the requisite 120 ECTS to continue to earn credits at the home universities in Ukraine while living in Switzerland, on the other hand, to learn a Swiss language while doing so. In Berne, a so-called preparatory year was created to help Ukrainian students learn German and gives them insight into Swiss politics. At the private Franklin University Switzerland in Lugano where English is the language of instruction, in the meantime, students are accepted for a first year during which they not only improve their English in courses on academic writing but also one of the Swiss languages while gaining some first insights into a range of disciplines offered at the university. They are only formally accepted once they have successfully passed all classes during the first year. Acquiring language competency in either German, French, Italian or English then remains of central importance for all students, and despite these innovative approaches often represents a formidable obstacle to being accepted at a university.

For those further along in their careers, from doctoral students to already established scholars and scientists from Ukraine, there has been a great deal of support in Switzerland since the war started in 2022, especially from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) which in partnership with the Swiss Sector of Scholars at Risk rapidly spoke some 9 million Swiss francs in March of 2022 to enable universities to host over 100 scientists and scholars in Switzerland. The SNSF also signed an agreement in the summer of 2022 with the National Research Foundation of Ukraine (NRFU) to coordinate a call for joint research projects from Swiss and Ukrainian scholars

[18] In Switzerland, a country with three official languages, and public and private universities with programs that are taught in German, French, Italian and English, education is largely regulated on the cantonal level. This means that regulations regarding language, language levels and admittance can change depending on the canton in which an S-status holder lives. For an explanation for the canton of Zurich, see https://www.zh.ch/content/dam/zhweb/bilder-dokumente/themen/migration-integration/ukraine-hilfe/ukraine-konflikt-informationen-zum-schulangebot/zugang_zu_schweizer_hochschulen_deutsch.pdf, accessed March 2023.

and scientists.[19] The language requirement so prominent at earlier stages of education falls away for most of the advanced academics who are relatively fluent in English, which has become the lingua franca of science and to a certain degree also of scholarship. On the level of academia, then, Switzerland is very much following the spirit of unconditional hospitality in the context of the S-status, though there are certain conditions attached to certain stages of education. The welcome culture shown in Switzerland in the area of education is rather impressive, at least for those holding an S-status. However, that still leaves quite a number of people out who today live in Switzerland as recognized refugees and originally came from places like Eritrea (29'960), Syria (13'373) and Turkey (8'428).[20] There are indications though that the kinds of programs created in academia for S-status holders within the context of unconditional welcome are retroactively being opened to individuals who came within the context of conditional welcome. Once new regulations, rules and programs are created, especially in complex bureaucratic institutions such as universities, it is hard to walk them back when confronted with the need of others in similar situations. Or to put it somewhat differently: stories told by policies and regulations are infectious and create norms that then eventually are applied evenly across the board.

This does not necessarily mean that there is no xenophobia or racism at work in the Swiss asylum system, but it does mean that in the case of unconditional hospitality, we need to look at narratives not on the individual level, but rather on the national and supranational level. This also helps us analyze how the status of countries and their inhabitants is negotiated through images and stories that circulate on a global level. Looking back over the last two centuries, geopolitical developments include the imprints of war, violence and environmental devastation; the relentless carving up of stretches of land that has left human beings scattered and civilizations in tatters; industrialisation and technologization that have soiled territories and poisoned soils; imperialisms and colonialisms that have left in their wake nations and peoples still struggling for sovereignty. Together these events have influenced the way territories and their inhabitants have merged into countries with greater and lesser power, and ever-shifting positions vis à vis one another. Because of this question of whether, for instance, the Bosniaks aren't white enough or too Muslim, as Suljagić suggests, or whether the Ukrainians are admitted so freely, as many suspect, simply because they present as white and quite often Christian, the investigation of unconditional asylum needs to be re-framed to include these larger supranational narratives about the situatedness of Ukraine between two colonial powers, and within overarching political entities, in this case, the EU, Russia and indeed, the wider world.

4. *Cultures of Hospitality as Tools of Nation Building*

Overall, the history of asylum regimes in Switzerland offers a broad range of interpretations of what it means to be foreign, to be displaced, and to offer shelter and hospitality as a host, or indeed to be denied entry altogether. These varying constructions of "the refugee" and of hospitality employed over the last two centuries allow us to appreciate that there are various gendered and racialized nuances that attach to people in need of shelter.[21] After the Vienna Congress of 1815, when the 22 cantons of Switzerland were called upon to found a new state, they had little in

[19] See https://www.snf.ch/en/ccX83GAUZFaJJ5Ly/news/a-year-of-commitment-to-researchers-from-ukraine, accessed March 30, 2023.

[20] See https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/462169/umfrage/anerkannte-fluechtlinge-in-der-schweiz-nach-herkunftslaendern/, accessed April 15, 2023.

[21] Given the parameters of this paper I can only offer a small slice here in the form of a couple of examples of unconditional asylum, or its opposite, unconditional denial of asylum. Indeed, the study of migration in Switzerland is a field which in recent years has become increasingly rich and includes several disciplinary approaches, including literary, sociological, political, legal and historical approaches.

common aside from the history of the Old Swiss Confederation and the failed Helvetic Republic, neither of which seemed very useful as a basis from which to draw an uplifting foundation story (though courtesy of the German dramatist Friedrich Schiller who popularized the legend of Wilhelm Tell in 1804, revolutionary against the Habsburgian Gessler in the 15th Century, Switzerland has a national hero who still figures on the 5-franc piece).[22] In the meantime, political actors fell largely into one of two camps: the conservatives, whose aim was to maintain the political structures and ideology of the Old Confederation, and the liberals, who wanted to build a new political order on the principles of individual freedom and egalitarianism. This latter, ultimately victorious, ideology styled itself on notions of humanitarianism, which were further embedded in the national discourse around the time of Switzerland's founding in 1848 when the new nation-state welcomed some 15,000 people fleeing revolutions in France and Germany. The new federal government underlined its position with regards to asylum in a memo that for a time was to be foundational for its asylum culture to all cantons on February 28, 1848: "Wherever refugees come from, whether they enter the territory of the Confederation armed or not, they are to be granted peaceful residence in accord with asylum law and following the laws of humanity."[23]

In terms of circumstance and numbers, the kind of unconditional hospitality currently demonstrated with the S-status is reminiscent of the asylum accorded the so-called Bourbaki troops in 1871 when the French army under General Charles Denis Sauter Bourbaki was welcomed into Switzerland after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71.[24] The 87,847 French soldiers who entered Switzerland over three days in the freezing cold of early February still constitutes the largest group of refugees Switzerland has ever taken in, but barely.[25] The effort it took to distribute, house, and feed what amounted at the time to an overnight increase of approximately 3% of the Swiss population of ca 2.8 million became one of the stories around which the relatively young Swiss nation, still more of an emigrant country than an immigrant country in the 19th Century, and bereft of the rich narrative fabric of revolution and military triumph most other European countries could draw from for their foundational legend, constructed its account of solidarity and humanitarianism.[26]

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[22] Friedrich Schiller, Wilhelm Tell, Tübingen, 1804. The legend of Wilhelm Tell had appeared earlier in Johannes von Müllers *Geschichten der schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft,* 1780 which in turn goes back to the *Cronicon Helveticum* written by the chronicler Aegidius Tschudi about Swiss history from 1001 to 1470. It appeared once as an original version (Originalschrift) in the mid-1530s, and once as an edited, final version (Reinschrift) drafted between 1568 and 1572. Schiller's play, which stayed close to von Müller's account, begins as a refugee story of sorts when Tell saves Konrad Baumgartner who killed the Burgvogt of Unterwalden because he threatened to rape his wife, and is fleeing Habsburgian soldiers.

[23] Marc *Spescha*, *Migrationsabwehr* im Fokus der Menschenrechte, Dike Verlag, 2007, p.152. The tug-of-war in the matter of ultimate authority on questions of asylum between the federal government and the cantons went on for some time and was only settled in 1925 when asylum became an entirely federal matter. See article 69 of the Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation 1925; see also Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz, https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/010374/2002-11-26/, accessed March 4, 2023.

[24] This welcome is depicted in the so-called Bourbaki Panorama in Lucerne. The massive 360-degree painting, named after the defeated general, and painted by Edouard Castres in 1881, spans 112 by 10 meters and documents one of the first humanitarian acts of the Swiss Red Cross. It depicts scenes of a bedraggled and beaten-down army as it relinquishes its weapons before crossing the border at Les Verrières and is given first aid by civilians and members of the Swiss Red Cross. Between the painting and its viewers is a stage on which 3D groupings of life-like mannequins, a train car, and guns extend the painting and give the impression of real life. For some of these depictions, see for instance: https://www.srf.ch/news/panorama/menschen-und-schicksale-die-bourbaki-internierung-im-monumentalen-panorama-gemaelde, accessed March 8, 2021.

[25] This is true for the end of February 2023, when the numbers of Ukrainians with S-status reported were around 75'000; see https://www.support-ukraine.bs.ch/registrierung/Zahlen-Status-S.html, accessed March 5, 2023.

[26] While the welcome was unconditional, all this help did not come cheap. When they left, the French government was presented with a bill of 12, 2 million Swiss francs to cover the expenses they had incurred. See https://www.bourbakipanorama.ch/fileadmin/files/Dokumente/2_Vermittlung/Schulen_Internierung_Bourbaki_Armee.pdf, accessed March 6, 2023. Another, much smaller work, by the Swiss painter Albert Anker, entitled Swiss

At the other end of the spectrum that begins with the two gestures of unconditional hospitality when modern Switzerland was founded in1848 and then again to the Bourbaki soldiers some twenty years later lies the unconditional withholding of hospitality, also based not on the stories individuals tell (though with fateful impact on all), but rather on the common race of a group of people fleeing war: Switzerland closed its borders to an estimated (and controversially discussed) 24'000 Jewish refugees on August 13, 1942. The circular order going out to all border patrols from the Swiss Police Department reads as follows: "Deserters, escaped prisoners of war and other military personnel, as well as political refugees are not to be sent back. Refugees merely for reasons of race, for example Jews, do not count as political refugees."[27] These examples of unconditional welcome, or its opposite, show the breadth of responses asylum seekers have experienced at the Swiss borders and how Switzerland has positioned itself with regard to other nations in Europe; there are many other examples of both generosity and the lack thereof. If you consider pacts between countries in this light, it becomes clear that the focus in any asylum system *is as much on the sort of country hospitality enables as on the sort of hospitality a country enables.* In fact, during the 18th and 19th centuries of nation-building, the way the politics of border and asylum were conceived was often fundamental to how fledgling nations constructed and built their identities and their political structures, in the sense both of restrictive and open forms of welcome but also, and perhaps more importantly, on who and what had the authority to decide how and whom to grant asylum, and what this meant for foreign affairs at the time. How has Ukraine, as an imaginary space, been negotiated over the years form from the inside and the outside? A short clip, taken out of context, of a talk given by the master storyteller President Volodymyr Zelenskyy himself at a press conference on the first anniversary of Russia's second invasion of Ukraine on February 25, 2023, can give us a hint.[28] In this clip that caused an uproar among millions of viewers in the US, Zelensky is portrayed in right-wing social media as saying the following: "The US will have to send their sons and daughters, exactly the same way as we are sending, their sons and daughters to war. And they will have to fight because it's NATO that we're talking about. And they will be dying, God, forbid, because it's a horrible thing." In reality, he communicated what has been his argument all along to Western leaders, namely that if Ukraine is not supported, it might lose the war and then Russia might invade NATO member countries in the Baltics (Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania) which under the treaty that governs NATO would oblige the US (and other NATO members) to enter the war, and to "send their sons and daughters".[29] What went lost in much of the Twitter noise over the supposed idea that American sons and daughter would have to fight in Ukraine was that Zelensky was reinforcing once more the message that the bodies of Ukrainian sons and daughters were effectively acting as a buffer for Europe, NATO and the West at large, against Russian aggression. And that no one seemed to find this unusual.

Hospitality, also hangs in Lucerne in the Panorama house and depicts the Bourbaki soldiers being taken care of in a manger by Swiss farmers. https://www.bourbakipanorama.ch/museum/geschichte/

[27] "Deserteure, entwichene Kriegsgefangene und andere Militärpersonen sowie politische Flüchtlinge sind nicht zurückzuweisen. Flüchtlinge nur aus Rassegründen, z.B. Juden, gelten nicht als politische Flüchtlinge." Circular order from the police department dated 13th of August 1942, BAR E 4001 (C) 1, Bd. 259, und BAR E 4300 (B) 3, Bd. 20. See also Ludwig, *Flüchtlingspolitik*, 1957, S. 205; see also Unabhängige Expertenkommission Schweiz, *Zweiter Weltkrieg Die Schweiz und die Flüchtlinge zur Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, https://www.uek.ch/de/publikationen1997-2000/fberd.pdf, p.93-94, accessed March 4, 2023.

[28] https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/02/politics/fact-check-zelensky-americans-fighting-ukraine-video/index.html, accessed March 8, 2023.

[29] The correct quote is as follows: "The US is never going to give up on the NATO member states. If it happens that Ukraine, due to various opinions and weakening – depleting – of assistance, loses, Russia is going to enter Baltic states, and NATO member states, and then the US will have to send their sons and daughters, exactly the same way as we are sending, their sons and daughters to war. And they will have to fight because it's NATO that we're talking about. And they will be dying, God forbid, because it's a horrible thing. I wish peace and Ukrainian support to the United States." Ibid, accessed March 8, 2023.

But then again, why should this be surprising? For Zelensky's argument fits seamlessly into a century-old perception of Ukrainians as commodified buffers. As art historian Asia Bazdyrieva argues in her 2022 article "No Milk, No Love":

For decades, Western Europeans have cast Eastern Europeans as bodies that perform cheap labor, bodies to prostitute, bodies made to sustain the pollution of the West's outsourced industries; they are to wear second-hand clothes from the EU and drive old cars that are no longer considered safe or ecological. They are the buffer zone, they are the production site, they are "developing," they don't have a political voice they are to be helped because they form a lower stratum whose presence is needed to serve those of a higher stratum. So the reason for this unprecedented support from the West at least when it comes to sending weapons and accepting certain refugees is not only that most Ukrainians are read as white, but also because they, too, belong to the category of the inhuman.[30]

For Bazdyrieva then the more important form of racism plays itself out in a very specific kind of register, namely that "a group of majority-white Europeans is added to the rendering of subracial, underclass, inhumane subjects."[31] Her broader argument undergirding this statement is about Ukraine-as-territory through the dual colonization by Western Europe and the Russian empire over the course of the 20th century focuses primarily on "living and nonliving matter cast as inhuman resources" by both imperial powers. This played out in the perception of Ukraine as a sheer endless resource, ready for the taking, including the extraction of coal and iron ore around the turn of the last century which would expand into the industrialization of the country for the benefit of the two dualling colonial powers; as well as in the popular notion of Ukraine as the "breadbasket" of Europe, a perfect example, according to Bazdyrieva, for the socio-technical imaginary which enables the making of a resource.[32] This imaginary, she argues, "helps to see how Ukraine's territory and its people are imagined as a component of material exchange."[33]

This shift from the framework of critical race theory familiar from the US context, which maps only imperfectly onto the European context, to a postcolonial framing of the issue helps us understand Ukraine as a transactional zone in the intersection of two imperial powers—positioned geographically at once in the middle of both powers, and the periphery of each-- where, precisely because it is imagined as having rich soul, and geological riches, land and humans have been commodified and, as Bazdyrieva would argue, rendered subracial and subhuman, over the last two centuries. This competitive commodification also makes some sense of the grain debacle between Russia and the West in the summer of 2022: the deal brokered by António Guterres, the UN's secretary-general, and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan with Russia's President Vladimir Putin for the export of grain last July only to have Russia halt that export with missiles on the port of Odesa the very next morning.[34] Zelensky's ongoing and repeated attempt to join the EU and

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[30] Ava Bazdyrieva, "No Milk, No Love" in e-flux Journal, issue 127, May 2022; see https://www.e-flux.com/journal/127/465214/no-milk-no-love/, accessed March 5, 2023. See also the recent course entitled The Making of Modern Ukraine by historian Timothy Snyder at Yale, in particular class 9: https://online.yale.edu/courses/making-modern-ukraine, accessed May 2023.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid. See for a further discussion of the history of Europe and territorialized statehood, John Agnew, "Borders on the mind: re-framing border thinking," in *Ethics &Global Politics*, 1:4, 175-191, 2008. DOI: 10.3402/egp.v1i4.1892, p.180.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Grain export from Ukraine during the war was widely reported. See for instance *The Economist*, in July 2022: https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/07/22/after-agreeing-to-let-ukraine-export-grain-russia-rockets-its-port?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=18151738051&ppcadID=&utm_campaign=a.22brand_pmax&utm_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gclid=CjwKCAiAu5agBhBzEiwAdiR5tFuWwf7ZDMxwYA8ndllapVVRCqekge0G1j21SMRiPl0WIbKEYBRgKxoCjIsQAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds; and *The Guardian* in November of 2022: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/oct/31/ukraine-ships-out-record-tonnage-grain-russia-withdrawal-scheme, both accessed on March 5, 2023.

NATO meanwhile are thwarted by what Bazdyrieva calls an "infantilizing narrative" furthered by the treatment of its citizens as commodities and inscribed in Russian textbooks and in the self-stylization of Ukraine itself.[35]

5. *Epilogue*

Such a postcolonial understanding of Ukrainians as a people who have historically been colonized and exploited both by the West and the East puts a somewhat different spin on Suljagić's claim that Ukrainians today are being offered refuge more readily than Bosniaks in the mid-nineties because they are not as brown, and Christian to boot, and therefore fit more readily in with the Swiss. Certainly, this postcolonial framing offers a more apt concept of how racism might be thought of in Western Europe and particularly in the context of this war. More relevant factors in this context might be that the unconditional welcome, though extended to all Ukrainians for the duration of the war regardless of their individual situation, is expected to be *limited in time*: when the war ends, the S-status ends. By contrast, the conditional asylum granted to some of the other nationalities and grounded in personal stories can be given indefinitely.

More relevant to this discussion than the putative racism on the part of the Swiss or the Swiss asylum system is the current relationship between Switzerland and the European Union. After Switzerland's population voted against joining the European Economic Area in a vote in 1992, Switzerland and the EU regulated their relations including important agreements for trade, freedom of movement in the EU and Switzerland, and the area of asylum and security. This seemed for quite a while to be the way to go. Then, within the area of migration, among other events, the conservative Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP), or Swiss People's Party, proposed a federal initiative titled "Against Mass Immigration" which demanded a limitation of migration, including refugees, into Switzerland with destabilizing implications for the bilateral agreements with the EU, and the EU itself has developed and changed as it went from 15 to 27 members states, many of the newcomers from former Eastern Europe. The S-status itself was designed by Switzerland in alignment with the regulatory stipulation used for the S-status by the EU. The current unconditional asylum for Ukrainians in Switzerland needs to be seen then against this international backdrop. This does not mean that there is no racism or xenophobia in Switzerland or in Europe, but rather that in the context of the S-status, these concepts need to be conceptualized in a way that considers the supranational backdrop and does not constitute a one-on-one adaptation to the discourse as it has developed in the US.

Returning to the notion that border crossings constitute heightened moments of storytelling and story reception both for those seeking refuge and for those granting it, I would argue that the S-status might be taken as a moment to reconsider how we collectively think of people living in our country because they need protection, regardless of their reason for leaving their homeland. In many of the conversations with Ukrainians I have had over the last year the question Odysseus asked when he arrived in Scheria: "What is this country I have come to now? Are all the people wild and violent or good, hospitable, and god-fearing?" have unclear answers. While a realization that the S-status comes with many privileges in contrast to what other asylum seekers receive, the narrative of the S-status comes across as something of a cover narrative: while there are many educational opportunities, including generous grants and language support, the period of the offered shelter which is contingent on an utterly unpredictable war means that only a few people are offered professional positions or study opportunities such as apprenticeships or doctoral studies. In other words, people tend on the whole to be perceived as "good, hospitable

[35] Ibid.

and god-fearing," but the broad story told by the system itself is unforgiving. Perhaps a return to the notion that hospitality shapes nations, and not the other way around, would help us all to find durable and equitable solutions in the area of forced migration.

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BIOGRAPHY

Caroline Wiedmer is professor of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies and the Co-Director of the Scholarships Without Borders Program at Franklin University Switzerland. She received her PhD from Princeton University with a dissertation on memory of the Holocaust in Germany and France. Her numerous books and articles circle questions of memory, motherhood, the intersections of law, narrative and culture, the maritime port as a space of trade and cultural exchange, various forms of sustainability, and refugee politics in Europe. She has received grants and research fellowships from Princeton University, the University of London, the Center for Gender Studies of the University of Basel, the NEH program at Stanford University, the Collegium Helveticum at the ETH in Zürich, the Center for Advanced German and European Studies of the Freie Universität of Berlin, and the Swiss National Science Foundation.

cwiedmer@fus.edu