

# Welcoming the foreigner: Notes on the possibility of multispecies hospitality

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Kavesh Welcoming the Foreigner

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## Abstract

What do the welcome and the refusal mean when the one who arrives is not human? By examining the moral attitude created through the acceptance of European racing pigeons in Pakistan and the capture of Pakistani “spy pigeons” at the India-Pakistan border, this article unknots multiple meanings of *arrival* and explores how shared values of hospitality and hostility emerge and interplay when a more-than-human Other arrives in a foreign land as an invited guest or an uninvited intruder. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's (2000) construction of *hospitality* and Punjabi Sufi poet-philosopher Waris Shah's discussion of *badal* (reciprocity), this article contends that in South Asia, reciprocal exchanges produce and sustain cooperative, competitive, or antagonistic bonds and propound an analytical avenue to critically rethink deconstruction of the home as a sovereign space.

## KEYWORDS

hospitality, hostility, reciprocity, ethics of acceptance, Heer-Ranjha

## Resumen

¿Qué significa la acogida y el rechazo cuando el que arriba no es humano? Al examinar la actitud moral creada a través de la aceptación de las palomas de carreras europeas, en Pakistán y la captura de “palomas espías” paquistaníes en la frontera India-Pakistán, este artículo desata, múltiples significados de *llegada* y explora cómo valores compartidos de hospitalidad y hostilidad emergen e interactúan cuando Otro más-que-humano llega a una tierra extranjera como un huésped invitado o como un intruso no invitado. Basándose en la construcción de *hospitalidad* de Jacques Derrida (2000) y la discusión de *badal* (reciprocidad) de Waris Shah, poeta-filósofo Sufí del Punjab, este artículo argumenta que en Asia del Sur, los intercambios recíprocos producen y sostienen lazos cooperativos, competitivos, o antagónicos y propone una avenida analítica para repensar críticamente la deconstrucción del hogar como un espacio soberano [hospitalidad, hostilidad, reciprocidad, ética de la aceptación, Heer-Ranjha]

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**FIGURE 1** Showing locations of captured “spy” pigeons across the India-Pakistan border. Credit: CartoGIS ANU. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

On a torrid summer day in 2008, I visited Akbar’s pigeon loft in rural Jhang to meet his homer pigeons, a European breed that very few aficionados were able to import into Pakistan at the time.<sup>1</sup> While many Punjabi pigeon keepers did not know how to import or “host” (*khidmat*, also meaning “to serve”) these foreign pigeons, Akbar contacted a Dutch company through the internet and acquired a few purebred Belgian homers (also called racers, carriers, messengers). When the air cargo containing precious racers was held by the Customs Department at the Lahore airport, Akbar dealt with the bureaucratic machinery and presented multiple documents for their release: non-objection certificates (NOCs), approval from the Punjab Wildlife Department, and reference letters from local politicians. He also had to pay extra customs duties to visit the hangar to feed his prized birds twice a day. Once the clearance was granted, he released the “foreigner” (*walaiti*) pigeons on his rooftop to a specially built pigeon house that aspired to European standards, with adequate ventilation, wooden perches, and separate breeding boxes. My fieldnotes at that time reveal how, one afternoon while lounging with Akbar in two rope cots in the spacious courtyard of his house, we spoke in detail about the unique qualities of racer pigeons. He told me how, unlike native pigeon breeds, the racers used their exceptional homing skills to navigate their way and raced toward their loft by flying sometimes 650 kilometers in a day (see Blechman, 2006, chapter 10; Jerolmack, 2013, chapters 6 and 7). Due to this exceptional quality, Akbar remarked, this breed was strategically deployed in WWI and WWII as “spies” to deliver messages when wireless, telegraph, and other sources of communication failed (see Corera, 2018). He showed me pictures of Cher Ami (French for “A Dear Friend”) on his laptop, a homing pigeon who, in WWI, successfully delivered a crucial message to the military base and saved 194 US army men of a lost battalion. In 2010, only two years after my visit to Akbar’s place, a Pakistani pigeon was captured in Amritsar, in India, near the India-Pakistan border, on suspicion of carrying a secret message (Bassi, 2010). About five years later, another Pakistani “spy pigeon” was detained by the Indian authorities in Manwal village, four kilometers from the border between India and Pakistan (Dawn, 2015). As of May 2021, eight such alleged “spy pigeons” had been confiscated, each carrying a secret number and a text stamped on the body (Figure 1). It was obvious that this “materially new” breed (Govindrajana, 2018, 73) of homer

pigeons not only was hosted by local Pakistani pigeon flyers but that their history of secretly communicating information during WWI and WWII was creating a tense situation between the two nuclear-armed neighbors with a history of many wars and ongoing armed conflicts between them.

In this article, I build on my long-term ethnographic engagement with Pakistani pigeon flyers to examine what it means for a pigeon “to come from abroad” in politically transforming circumstances in South Asia and how mutually shared values of hospitality and hostility emerge and interplay when a pigeon arrives in a foreign land as an invited guest or an uninvited spy. My questions are grounded in the arrival of European racing pigeons in Pakistan and the capture of Pakistani spy pigeons at the India-Pakistan border, and they lead me to ask: What does it mean to open the door for a more-than-human Other? How are these animal Others welcomed and accommodated as intimate foreigners or shunned as potential threats that may induce serious panic in the host? And in what ways does the deconstruction of the house as a sovereign space render it a site of hospitality for the newcomer?

To explore such questions, I start with Jacques Derrida's (2000) suggestion that hospitality and hostility exist together in a power imbalance between the host and the guest and shape our understanding of home and the question of the foreigner/stranger. However, this Derridean interpretation of hospitality is less convincing in the context of rural Punjab, where, as my ethnography suggests, the seemingly intertwined values of invitation and rejection, or the ability to receive and deny, diversely impact people's modes of relating to Others. To explicate this point, I take help from *Heer* (Shah, [1767] 1978), a Punjabi text written by Waris Shah in the mid-1760s that tells the story of acceptance and refusal by reflecting on precolonial Punjabi values of marital alliances, class and caste struggle, patrilineal ties, mystic authority, and cross-species intimacy. This famous tale is known to almost all Pakistanis and Indians; is repeated in Indian cinema and popular radio programs; is told and retold in Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, and other languages; and remains popular among my urban and rural pigeon-flying interlocutors.<sup>2</sup> The culturally embedded analytical lens of *Heer* helps me unravel a grounded understanding of hospitality and hostility in South Asia and to argue that though welcome and refusal in Punjab might emerge as intertwined ideals, they have distinct cultural roots and generally operate through the structure of reciprocity (or in Punjabi, *badal*). Waris Shah's emphasis on reciprocal exchanges remains different from Derrida's entwinement of hospitality and hostility; it offers us a way to consider power dynamics, moral compartments, and structures of hierarchical dealings that shape disparate values of generosity and animosity in South Asia.

This ethnographic analysis of human-bird relatedness in South Asia starts by examining the centrality of hospitality and welcoming in Derrida's ethics of the Other. In the next section, I unknot the apparent and persistent dilemma between the philosophical and cultural conceptions of hospitality by building on Waris Shah's *Heer* and notable anthropological works exploring theoretical, empirical, and conceptual tenets of the concept in South Asia and beyond to invite a reexamination of the Derridean universalist notion of “hospitality.” My ethnographic observations suggest the key role of reciprocity (*badal*) while hosting a foreign homer pigeon in Pakistan and capturing a potential spy pigeon at the highly militarized India-Pakistan border. In the coda, I entwine Derrida and Waris Shah's conceptualization of hospitality with the ethics of opening the door to suggest that pigeons, both as European racing breeds and as Pakistani spies, are not only strangers in foreign lands but beings whose acceptance and refusal provide a reflective space to critically rethink the deconstruction of the home as a sovereign space. Thinking about these border crossings, where pigeons sometimes emerge as enthusiastic companions and other times as potential threats, suggests how the morality of accepting the Other along with the novel threats they bring could cultivate the potential of welcoming Others by crossing preconceived boundaries of home. This becomes crucial, especially now when studies both in anthropology and in other disciplines, continue to engage with the subject of hospitality in diverse ways: while studying migration, tourism, climate crises, political movements, business and industry, and casual exchanges.

## HOSPITALITY, HOSTILITY, HOSTPITALITY

The ethic of hospitality, according to Derrida, is absolute or hyperbolic hospitality, an unconditional welcome that is pure and does not involve any violence on the guest by the host. Derrida's understanding of hospitality builds on Emmanuel Levinas's ethics (Derrida, 2000, 159n5), where the Other enters through a face-to-face encounter and retains their alterity in an asymmetrical relation (Levinas, [1961] 1991, 210–13; Kavesh, 2023b). For Levinas, the self must expose an ethical demand, a responsibility that requires it to welcome the Other and not objectify or subsume them under preconceived categories (Levinas, [1961] 1991, 68, 79–81; Levinas, [1974] 1998, 15). He argues that it is through this welcome that the host can appreciate the uniqueness of the stranger and discovers an ethic of the Other.

In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida (1999, 85) argues that “all of Levinas's thought is, wants to be, and presents itself as a teaching ... on the subject of what ‘to welcome’ or ‘to receive’ should mean.” Levinas's ([1961] 1991) *Totality and Infinity*, according to Derrida, is not only a book that locates an effective departure from Heideggerian phenomenological centrality of the self to unknot infinite possibilities of the Other but also a treatise about the ethics of hosting and welcoming. As he builds on Levinasian ethics, Derrida (1999, 50) starts to conceive hospitality as “ethicity itself, the whole and the principle of ethics,” and effectively devises a criticism of Kant's ([1795] 1917) conception of hospitality outlined in *Perpetual Peace*. Kant's idea of hospitality starts with asking the guest's name—the question that creates a demand, rendering the guest to respond to the host's request, subjecting them to a power relationship. Derrida (2000, 29) is adamant that unconditional hospitality should not involve an interrogation of the new arrival and should be “given to the other before they are identified.” The opposite of unconditional hospitality, Derrida argues, is its

existing form, conditional hospitality, which is enmeshed in the laws of hospitality, including the conditions, norms, rights, and duties. He intimates that the ethics should lie in offering a hospitable home to the exiled Other without a question or a condition.

Let us say yes to *who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female. (77; emphasis in original)

However, Derrida implies that the provision of absolute hospitality, the very act of unconditional welcoming, can risk the status of the host, leading them to lose mastery over the house as well as sovereignty and the dominant status; “the one who invites ... becomes the hostage” (125). The guest, someone who was unconditionally invited in, could become the new master and the host turns into the guest:

the *hôte* who receives (the host), the one who welcomes the invited or received the *hôte* (the guest), the welcoming *hôte* who considers himself the owner of the place, is in truth a *hôte* received in his own home. He receives the hospitality that he offers in his own home; he receives it *from* his own home—which, in the end does not belong to him. The *hôte* as host is a guest. (Derrida, 1999, 41; emphasis in original)

Such contrasting assemblage between hosting and the hostage is etymologically driven from the Latin word *hostis*, which is the origin for host and enemy (Derrida, 2000, 43), leading Derrida to merge the terms: “the foreigner (*hostis*) welcomed as guest or as enemy. Hospitality, hostility, *hostpality*” (45).

The analytical flexibility in the Derridean construct of hospitality and its intertwinement with hostility turns it into, in the words of anthropologist Matei Candea (2012, 42), a “scale-free abstraction,” thereby rendering it conceptually applicable to multiple host-guest relationships. Particularly now with the intensifying global refugee crisis, when the foreigner is both a stranger and an intruder, an invited guest and a parasite, an asylum seeker and a potential threat to the existing normative order, Derrida’s discussion of *hostpality* takes a central position. Overseas detention centers, walls that are built to keep the fragile host nations safe from possible intruders, invasions that create and intensify refugee crises, and sweeping victories of right-wing politicians aiming to enact anti-immigration policies appear to reinforce analytical proximity between the conceptual categories of hospitality and hostility. However, since Derrida’s conceptualization is influenced by the focus on Europe (France, in particular), where asylum seekers and refugees end up seeking protection and acceptance, there is a need to examine how far Derrida’s conception of *hostpality* is relevant when our questions are based in the Global South. Transcending the geographical scale also allows us to pose epistemologically challenging questions, such as how the ethics of hospitality manifest when our analysis is inspired by ethnography (and not philosophy). What do the welcome and the refusal mean when the one who arrives is not human but a bird?

The intricate relationship that many avian species form, as demonstrated through anthropological scholarship, actively disrupts analytically comparable categories of hospitality and hostility. Studies examining the transmission of avian influenza raise questions about new meanings of hosting and sharing: domestic poultry and wild birds may host contagious viral agents and transmit these pathogens to humans, causing harm without any underlying motive of interspecies hostility (Keck, 2020; Lowe, 2010; Porter, 2019). In falconry, too, when the bird of prey is hosted and trained to kill, it is not hostile to what it kills. Human-falcon companionship, cooperation, and communication are paramount in this hosting situation (Schroer, 2021, 141–42). For Waigeo men working as guides for international birdwatchers in Indonesia (Tsing, 2022, 16–18), and for Aboriginal Australians interpreting the upside-down hanging of flying foxes as “calling for” rain (Rose, 2012, 131–34), it is a story of birds’ affective and intimate coexistence with the flora that hosts them than an expression of hostility. In the context of South Asia, Taneja (2021, 238) finds the ethics of hospitality to sparrows in the writings of Indian political thinker Maulana Abul Kalam Azad as mutual “experiments in cross-species intimacy.” Veena Das (2013) further untangles the significance of interspecies intimacy through her explanation of the ethics of noncruelty in the Vedic-Hindu formulation. She interprets a Vedic story of the parrot who willingly dies by staying alongside the withering tree that once hosted it and suggests we “accept the power of intimacy” while interpreting multiple meanings of co-living with animal Others (27).

The possibility of intimate coexistence beyond the entwinement of hospitality and hostility remains a continuous theme within Indigenous scholarship, aiding us to not only disrupt European and North American modes of understanding but also to foreground more-than-humans as ethical Others (Nadasdy, 2007; Rose, 2011; TallBear, 2019; Todd, 2018). In most such discussions, reciprocal exchanges and mutualistic responsibilities remain critical for sustaining interspecies intimacy and are sometimes interpreted through Mauss’s ([1924] 2002) explanation of a gift and a counter-gift that is continuously being reciprocated to revive relationality and restore equality. However, conceiving pigeons as a gift could put them in danger of objectification, and their exchange without an expectation of reciprocity could possibly lead to what Derrida (1992, 2014) famously called the “impossibility” of the gift. This leads me to rethink relationality from a different, ethically expansive angle of hospitality. That is, to “imagine what anthropology might look like today,” as Candea and Da Col (2012, 1) ask in the introduction to their special issue on hospitality, “if Marcel Mauss had chosen hospitality rather than the gift as the subject of his 1924 treatise.” As I go beyond such emphasis on a gift relationship, I start to consider hospitality as a constitutive ethic through which one opens the door of the house for a more-than-human Other. To unravel various

facets of hospitality and to comprehend the ongoing affinity between welcome and animosity in contemporary South Asia, I start with locating the role of *badal* (reciprocity) by building on precolonial Punjabi Sufi writings of Waris Shah.

## WARIS SHAH, RECIPROCITY, AND HOSPITALITY

The stranger, foreigner, or visitor is not always a hostile subject in the Punjab; neither are they in a competitive relationship with the host. Unlike the French term *hôte*, which has Latin roots and denotes both host and guest, Urdu and Punjabi have distinct etymological roots for host, guest, and hostility. The word for the host, *mezban*, derives from the Persian root *mei* (soft, mild) and has cognate words such as *mayazd* (feast) and *maedeh* (food). The word for the guest, on the other hand, has a different root and originates from the Persian *meit* (to stay) and has *mihan* (homeland) as its cognate word. In rural areas of Punjab, the word *parhana* is sometimes employed for the guest, which has a completely different etymological root. This leaves us with the Punjabi word for enemy, *dushman*, which originates from the Persian root *dus* (bad, evil) and has *dozd* (thief), *dosnam* (insult), and *dosvar* (difficult) as cognate words.<sup>3</sup> The point is that unlike English or French, where words for hospitality and hostility have similar etymological roots, Punjabi words for the host, guest, and enemy have distinct origins. Such a point has recently been raised by Alkan (2021, 184) in her ethnographic work with Turkish hosts and Syrian migrants, where she finds a weak conceptual interlink between hospitality and hostility: “these two modes of relating to others might be closely linked, but their relation is not deterministic” (188). These are prevailing ethno-religious norms, she suggests, that structure values of intimacy or resentment toward a foreign guest.

How, then, we may ask, do cultural categories of hospitality and hostility operate within South Asia? As my conceptualization is grounded in the context of Punjab, I take help from Waris Shah’s *Heer* to untangle the knot between hospitality and hostility, friends and strangers, welcome and unwelcome, inclusion and exclusion. Such an approach is helpful in formulating a theoretical understanding of the nexus of hospitality and hostility and see how they both work within the same cultural mechanism to influence people’s lived experiences.

Waris Shah starts the book with the emotional peregrinations of Ranjha, who abandons his lavish life after the death of his father and travels from his native town, Takht Hazara, to Jhang. There, he meets Heer Sial, a girl whose charming looks are famous all over Punjab, and Ranjha takes up the job of a cowherd for Heer’s parents. Ranjha is a flute musician, and an affectionate person, who spends the next 12 years in this village, until Heer’s parents become wise to their romantic liaison and hurriedly arrange their daughter’s marriage into a wealthy family. The idea of this marriage fills Heer with anguish and longing for Ranjha, who has left the village in grief to become a wandering mendicant now meandering restlessly all over the plains of the Punjab. Some months later, Ranjha locates Heer’s whereabouts, and the lovers reunite and arrange an elopement. The day the two of them are to be united in wedlock, the jealous relatives of Heer send her poisoned sweets (*laddu*) as a marriage gift, deceiving them into meeting their end.

In his famous *Heer*, Waris Shah ([1767] 1978) draws attention to the ethos of hospitality and hostility enmeshed within the cultural principle of reciprocity (*badal*).<sup>4</sup> The protagonist of his story, Ranjha, finds hospitality on his way to Jhang and is offered help by strangers: provided food, a place to stay, attentive company, and a bed filled with flowers and invited as a travel companion. Despite all hardships and heartache, Ranjha finds Punjab a generous land where people greet him warmly, appreciate his mastery of the flute, offer him help, and extend invitations to visit their villages (53–54). Yet such hospitality is mostly enmeshed within the principle of reciprocity. As Ranjha reaches a mosque to spend the night, he is expected to reciprocate by worshiping there (22). Also, when he needs a ferry to cross the river, he is reminded that he must reciprocate this passage with material exchange (25), and at Heer’s parents’ house, he is provided with a place to stay in exchange for serving as a buffalo herder (36). As reciprocity informs the values of hospitality, it also structures the modes of hostility. The main antagonist of the story, Kaidu, receives a beating from Heer and her friends and thereafter continues to reciprocate hostility (58–62). Similarly, the religious leader (*qazi*) turns hostile to Heer after her polemics at the time of her forced marriage (76–78), and later, Heer’s sister-in-law, Sethi, remains antagonistic until she is reciprocated with help in her own love affair (129–30). On many occasions, Waris Shah convinces that, in the cultural context of Punjab, an absence of reciprocity breaks the norm of hospitality and hostility.

While hospitality is not a prerogative of South Asia or any other particular culture (Herzfeld, 2012), many anthropological accounts from different areas of the world reveal how the concept is enmeshed within the values of reciprocity. Relations, Strathern (2020) argues, are maintained through shared understandings to preserve associations. For instance, a host can disgrace the guest by not showing interest in the conversation, rejecting the offer of a return visit, or avoiding casual social exchanges (Agier, 2021, 19, 27–28; Dorsky, 1986, 70–71; Meneley, 1996, 49–50). The host-guest relationship depends on mutual respect in a temporarily shared space (Pitt-Rivers, 2017, 173–74), and *not* asking anything of the guest could itself be interpreted as an act of hostility. Reciprocal exchanges channeled through hospitality can turn “strangers into familiars, enemies into friends, friends into better friends, outsiders into insiders, non-kin into kin” (Selwyn, 2000, 19, 34). By constantly embracing the expectation of reciprocity (Lynch et al., 2011, 9; Still, 2010, 16), hospitality sometimes forms a link with the morality of exchange (Shryock, 2008) and other times lies beyond the “moral framework” of calculation and ethics (Marsden, 2012, 127).

Many ethnographies of Pakistan also highlight the importance of reciprocal hospitality and its rooted significance within local cultural systems and normative frameworks. In Barth’s ([1959] 1965, 11–12) ethnography, and about two decades later in Lindholm’s (1982, 228–30) work with the Pathans of Swat, the normative construction of hospitality and hostility is analyzed through values of reciprocity. Lindholm, for example, argues that

hospitality, particularly when offered to an unknown stranger, is provided with the expectation of fostering friendships that may prove instrumental at the time of a tribal feud. Stephen Lyon (2004, 77), in his ethnography of a Punjabi village, uses Lindholm's argument to suggest that the ethics of hospitality discussed in the context of Swat also apply to Punjabi villages. These and many other ethnographies emerging in the context of Pakistan (see, for example, Ahmed, 1976, 58; Hull, 2012, 75; Marsden, 2005, 62) relate values of hosting as a cultural ideal, sometimes channeled to welcome the complete stranger and the foreigner and at other times to reciprocate cultural values of respect and dignity by inviting guests. These accounts suggest rethinking Derridean entwinement between hospitality and hostility (what Derrida calls "hostpitality") and explore how the obligation of *badal* (reciprocity) leads us to focus on distinct cultural mechanisms of these two modes of relating to Others.<sup>5</sup>

Below, as I examine the moral attitude created through cultural values of hospitality and hostility to foreign pigeons, I explore how, in contemporary South Asia, *badal* continues to produce and sustain cooperative, competitive, or antagonistic bonds that actively define moral personhood. I suggest that reciprocity through hospitality constitutes a relatedness of care, affection, and acceptance, and reciprocal hostility manifests when the Other is considered an outsider, a foreigner, and a stranger who does not belong and may pose a threat and induce panic. Both modes of relating to Others, I suggest, develop through preexisting structures of power and politics, care and pain, affection and fear, and provide an effective conceptual framework to unknot entwined categories of welcome and refusal.

## HOSTING A FOREIGNER

In 2008, when I first started my ethnographic engagement with pigeon keepers in South Punjab, there were a few homer pigeon keepers in Pakistan. Not many knew what to feed the pigeons, when to breed them, or how to train them. Since 2016–2017, as the process of importing international animals became simpler, and as Facebook allowed Pakistani pigeon keepers to connect with international breeders, many people have taken up this activity, importing European racer pigeon breeds and forming multiple racing clubs and societies in major cities, including Karachi, Islamabad, Peshawar, and Quetta. While the enthusiasm for keeping and flying tippler pigeons remains predominant in Pakistan, and millions of people take up this activity on a daily basis, the racing sport has a growing number of enthusiasts, and some flyers even predict that in a decade or so this European passion will supersede native tippler pigeon-flying sports.

In 2021, I interviewed Wali, a young pigeon aficionado who has imported European racer pigeons since 2009. Our mutual friend, a local journalist actively covering the sport of pigeon flying for the past 13 years, introduced me to him. In our first conversation, I was astonished by Wali's vast knowledge of homers: the biology behind their navigational skills, famous Pakistani pigeon racers, popular racing competitions around the world, modern electronic timing systems adapted for drawing results, and complicated Excel spreadsheets utilized to measure pigeons' speed and performance during the competition. Wali also possessed a wealth of knowledge of celebrated breeds and breeders, particularly those belonging to Belgium, the Mecca for racer pigeons. Speaking about a Belgian black checker present in his loft, he detailed the pedigree of the bird—his parents, siblings, and grandparents—and a record of the three races he had participated in where he achieved the top three positions. The purple claws of the bird, he said, reflected good blood circulation and hinted at his hidden potential, and his blood-red eyes were just like New Kim—another Belgian pigeon sold to a Chinese fancier during an auction in 2020 for a record price of \$1.9 million.

Staying with pigeon flyers on their rooftops over the years, I have never been able to differentiate a European homer from a native tippler pigeon. To my eye, they both look the same: similar bodies, beaks, eyes, and claws and almost identical colors and patterns, while also flying similarly and requiring much the same care and handling. But to Wali, they are enormously different. A foreign racer pigeon, he says, possesses a broader chest (*chora seena*) and a narrow tail (*band kunda*), a silky soft body (*reshami malaim jism*), and lengthy central bone (*chori hadi*), and is lighter in weight and larger in size. Moreover, the eighth, ninth, and tenth feathers (*kali*) of racers resemble those of a falcon, and their strong wing muscles allow them to fly hundreds of kilometers a day. "It was years of careful and scientific breeding in Europe," Wali remarks, that have made these pigeons "muscular and strong like wrestlers," and "intelligent beings." Many among them, he relates, remain long-distance or marathon pigeons, and some have become sprinters or fast-flying pigeons; "the science lay in combining both these attributes to produce a remarkable bloodline."

The European racers' navigational skill, stamina, and speed, and their unique attribute of being either a sprint pigeon or a marathon pigeon, are what makes a Punjabi enthusiast categorize them as *walaiti* (foreigner) and host them with enthusiasm. This category of foreignness was cultivated on scientific principles by a European breeder who began with selecting the *right* mating pair, providing a comfortable breeding environment in the loft, and offering careful attention to the egg and to the young pigeon, and as the bird matured, the breeder provided her with the best feed and training. For a Pakistani pigeon flyer, the act of importing a foreign pigeon was an act of *badal* (reciprocity), where money was exchanged to host an embodiment of another (foreign) pigeon flyer's years of hard work, devotion, and dedication. Wali's cousin, Rafi, another racing pigeon fancier from the same area, averred that the reciprocal relationship between a European breeder and a Pakistani buyer is built on trust: "the seller only put healthy birds for auction, and a healthy pigeon has 90% chance of arriving well and safe." After establishing contact with a British fancier through Facebook, Rafi acquired some high-quality racing pigeons and secured excellent results in recent competitions. These foreign birds personified their British breeder's personality. Rafi knew that he may never meet the British fancier in person, and yet he was able to know him by hosting the imported pigeons. Each detail of these pigeons, including their feathers and tails, the stretch of their wings, and the breadth of their shoulders, communicated the enthusiasm, affection, and interspecies intimacy of the foreign fancier. For Rafi and other Pakistani homer pigeon flyers, the act

of importing and hosting a racing pigeon was akin to recognizing the years of hard work of the foreign breeder. This allowed them to take the history of mutualistic attachment between the foreign breeder and his pigeons to form their own intimate understanding of the newly arriving pigeon.

Both Derrida and Waris Shah explicate that foreigners do not conform to the values of homogeneity, that they may not speak like others or look like others, and yet this attribute of being different makes them the subject of hospitality (Derrida, 2000, 49; Shah, [1767] 1978, 36). The foreign homers who possess a body structure different from native birds are provided hospitality because of their specific quality of racing long distances and efficiently locating their loft. Such unique skills of homers allow Pakistani enthusiasts to involve them in a racing sport that is structurally different from native pigeon competitions, including *tukri-waly dari* competitions, where the birds fly in circles above rooftops, *khokha* open-loft competition, in which the avian companions are judged on their sharpness and athleticism while flying in an isolated piece of land, and *parwazi*, or tippler high-flying and low-flying competitions, which involve pigeons ascending vertically to the sky for a full day and returning to their designated rooftop before sunset. Racers or homers, as the names suggest, are involved in a race, and they are assessed on their quality to complete it in the shortest period. Hosting these athletic pigeons promises something new to the long-standing tradition of pigeon flying in South Asia, allowing most of my pigeon-flying friends like Shoab to attain liberation from succumbing to the hierarchal authority of the old pigeon masters (*ustad*). While millions of pigeon flyers across Pakistan continue to consult pigeon masters to get their well-guarded recipes for mixing a prescribed quantity of herbs, nuts, and spices to form a pill, an all-rounder used for building stamina and endurance, curing general ailments, and supporting birds to fly high to the ether, Shoab's homers do not need a pill. He simply goes on the internet, searches for homers' diet and medication, and prepares the mix.

The European homers' distinct body structure allows Pakistani pigeon aficionados to revalue interspecies intimacy in distinct ways. By keeping a physically different breed, they host the foreign pigeon flyer they might never meet as well as attain liberation from the hierarchical structure of a master-disciple relationship that characterizes traditional pigeon-keeping in the subcontinent. The transformative power of hosting also leads them to breed the newcomer with care, train them through routinized "tosses" (training exercises), and fly them in cooperation with other pigeon enthusiasts, while at the same time nourishing familiarity, companionship, and conviviality. However, the act of accepting foreign pigeons who arrive at home from a foreign land is also about accepting novel threats. Unlike other animals, such as the "Indian monkey" who was captured in 2011 in Pakistan and caged in Bahawalpur Zoo for trespassing, or the "Chinese yaks" who are suspected of hiding microphones in their shaggy coats along the Sino-Indian border (Mathur, 2019), pigeons are conceived as "agentive" spies due to their ability to successfully navigate paths and their historical roles in WWI and WWII in transmitting secret information. In such a context, pigeons who have a foreign script stamped on their body are perceived as uninvited intruders and the process of acceptance gets enmeshed with ideas of panic, fears, threats, and danger.

## "SPY" PIGEONS ACROSS THE CONTESTED BORDER

Since Partition in 1947, the relationship between Pakistan and India remains contentious. Many South Asian historians argue that the fractured process of Partition, which resulted in the killing and displacement of tens of millions of people, not only ripped apart "the territorial unity of the subcontinent" but also set the stage for continued hostility between both countries (Jalal, 2013, 145; see also Chatterjee, 2001). Despite three major wars (1947–1948, 1965, and 1971), two limited wars (1999, 2019), and many conflicts that almost converted into wars, regular border skirmishes, particularly along the disputed Kashmir region, are common. After having added hundreds of nuclear warheads to their arsenal, both countries continue to accuse each other of dispatching countless spies (Bhaskar, 2003; Shaffer, 2019). The hostility to "spy" pigeons, as conceptualized in their understanding as others, outsiders, foreigners, or intruders, emerges through such preexisting reciprocal relatedness between both nation-states.

The first case of a "spy" pigeon was reported in May 2010, when some Indian newspapers covered a story of a suspicious pigeon marked with Urdu (Pakistani) script on her wings. The most recent incident was in April 2021, when the Indian Border Security Force demanded the police register a first investigation report (FIR) against the uninvited intruder (*The Indian Express*, 2021). The X-rays and careful physical examinations over the years did not reveal possession of any mechanical device, camera, or audio recorder by any of these eight alleged "spy" pigeons. The main proof of them being "spies" was the markings in foreign script stamped on their wings. However, when the script was deciphered, it did not yield any concrete information other than the names, addresses, and phone numbers of some Pakistani pigeon flyers.

As pigeons were identified with Urdu (Pakistani) text, their primary identity as "birds of sport" transformed, converting them into "mysterious individuals" (Li, 2020, 231) and "the class alien, the foreigner" (Verdery, 2018, 132), who represent a hostile country and thus carry the persona of threat, danger, and panic.<sup>6</sup> However, who were these avian "spies"? When I asked this, many pigeon-keeping interlocutors suggested that these were tippler pigeons and not homers/racers, and that like all domestic pigeons, these birds were stamped with their keeper's names, phone numbers, and home addresses before they participated in the competition with the view that if they were lost, they could be returned to their flyer. After some difficulty, I succeeded in locating and interviewing two pigeon flyers whose pigeons were caught on suspicion of espionage in India. They blamed the nationalist media in both countries for blowing such incidents out of proportion. As both enthusiasts resided within five kilometers of the India-Pakistan border in Lahore and Sialkot, they held that their cherished pigeons often ended up crossing the border in an attempt to escape from a falcon or avoid a dust storm, or when they get disoriented in heavy monsoon rain. Interestingly, it was the falcon, the pigeon's nemesis, that they blamed as the hostile other rather than the neighboring state.

A multispecies ethics of hospitality, Van Dooren (2019, 104) suggests while exploring anthropocentric meanings around the eradication of house crows in the Netherlands, largely surrounds how other species are welcomed or refused in places dominated by humans. Van Dooren's analysis of hospitality is enmeshed with the idea of appropriation—by invitation and refusal, the host is appropriating a place for oneself (125). The foreign pigeon's arrival at home is also encapsulated in the idea of appropriation. Pakistani homer pigeon flyers appropriate a place for themselves by inviting and accommodating European pigeons at home. Many construct lofts for homers by hiring skilled carpenters and showing them countless videos and photos from the internet of European lofts. After months of work on their rooftops, and after much making and remaking, they succeed in constructing a home for the newly arriving racing pigeons that resembles, in a great many ways, the European loft.<sup>7</sup> "My loft," Akbar told me in 2021, "is specifically built to host these valuable pigeons." Specifically using the English term "loft" and distancing himself from other pigeon keepers who would keep native breeds and use *khokha*, *darba*, or *pinjra* for their pigeon coops, he insisted that a guest cannot be offered proper hospitality without a proper house. This construction of the home loft—enmeshed in their values of more-than-human care, hospitality, and welcoming—is accomplished with the idea of appropriation, that the foreign pigeon feels *at home*, quickly bonds with the human caretaker, and reciprocates by breeding offspring and benefitting their new keeper. As "spy pigeons" arrive at the border and are identified with a foreign script, the home is safeguarded and appropriated, keeping in view the existing history of reciprocal hostility between two countries. Both on the rooftops and at the border, the idea behind appropriating the place for humans structures the foundation of hospitality and hostility to a more-than-human foreigner at home.

A close reading of Waris Shah's *Heer* also suggests the prevalence of hostile relationality within undivided Punjab where reciprocity (*badal*) defines relationships and structures values of welcoming and refusal. For instance, an exchange of harsh letters between Heer and Ranjha's sisters-in-law (Shah, [1767] 1978, 66–68) set the background of this hostility, and later when Heer's father consults his kinsmen on the possibility of arranging Heer's marriage with Ranjha, they reply: "We never allied ourselves with the Ranjhas, their sons could never marry our girls" (70).

The Punjabi word *saak kita*, which Sekhon translated as "allied ourselves," can also be translated as "making new relationships" that, in most cases, are knotted with reciprocal expectations. The kinsmen's response to Heer's father for why the union of lovers was not possible is based on nonexistent caste relations, family ties, or exchange marriage alliances with the Ranjha tribe. These preexisting reciprocal (*adal-badal*) relationships influenced the kinsmen's conception of connectedness and contention and led them to disregard the ambitions of young lovers. Similarly, discourse around the capture of "spy" pigeons does not suggest hostility to the pigeon as a bird or an animal. Rather it indicates the preexisting reciprocal hostile relationship between India and Pakistan that leads to the categorization of a lost pigeon as a threat. As many pigeon flyers told me, it was the vanishing of the reciprocal hospitality relationship between Indian and Pakistani pigeon flyers in recent years that has led to the categorization of wayward pigeons as spies. To them, as the values of reciprocal hospitality diminish, the culture of inhospitality emerges and leads the authorities to blame pigeons, a historical symbol of peace, as intruders, enemies, and spies, as well as a threat to the home.

## CODA: OPENING THE DOOR FOR A MORE-THAN-HUMAN OTHER

Much of the understanding of hospitality is dependent on the physicality of home, a place of mutual attunement where beings learn to become-with (Haraway, 2008) each other and form myriad threads of relationalities—from belonging, inclusion, warmth, and care to exclusion, oppression, violence, and physical and emotional labor (see also Ahmed et al., 2020; Boccagni, 2017). It is also an affective space that is either threatened by the presence of foreigners or those who do not belong (Walters, 2004), or it can serve as a site of generosity (Fleischmann and Steinhilper, 2017). However, the ethics lie in deconstructing the sovereignty of the home, transcending those very boundaries that maintain its sanctity, and conceiving it as a site that is constantly given away to Others. In that same vein, homelessness could not be interpreted as not having a home or a place to stay but, as Fred Moten (2021) convincingly argues, as a practice of giving your house away constantly by violating its preexisting boundaries.

What does it mean to violate the sovereignty of home and open the door to welcome a more-than-human Other? This remains a key ethical question for both Derrida and Waris Shah. While Derrida's conceptualization of home is larger in scale where a country opens its border to welcome strangers (refugees, asylum seekers, migrants) and extends unconditional generosity, for him, the basis of hospitality remains "the deconstruction of the at-home; deconstruction is hospitality to the other" (Derrida, 2002, 364). This allows him to conceive of home as a place where the host was once hosted, and where hosting the newly arriving guest (both the human and the more-than-human) requires the host to become a guest again. This is eloquently depicted in his discussion of a female cat whose piercing gaze at his home makes him question his subjectivity (Derrida, 2008, 3–10) as well as his explication of the snake that appears at a water trough in D. H. Lawrence's poem (Derrida, 2009) and raises ethical concerns about the sovereignty of home. The snake is "away from home" and requires water to survive, and this act of arriving, Derrida (246) argues, makes the snake deserve hospitality at a place dominated by humans.

Waris Shah's discussion also implies that it is the ethical right of the new arrival, the other who could be a foreigner or a stranger, a human or a more-than-human, to receive a welcome at the home without being posed with a condition first. Like Derrida, he conceives of animals as ethical Others who actively shape people's lifeworlds through their agentive acceptance or candid refusal. Ranjha, in his story, is a cowherd who forms a cross-species companionship with buffaloes for 12 years, and on some occasions within the story, the cattle host him better than human villagers. For instance, when Heer's parents ask Ranjha to leave the village and he becomes homeless, the buffaloes simply refuse to comply with any new

cowherd (Shah, [1767] 1978, 46). Such rejection by cattle becomes instrumental in reshaping Heer's parent's attitude, rendering them to foreground generosity over hatred and welcome over refusal. Witnessing the buffaloes' defiance, they beseech Ranjha to return to their home, telling him that "the herds, the lands, Hir [Heer], all are yours" (47). Ranjha's intimate companionship with cattle and the buffaloes' noncompliance with other cowherds enable Waris Shah to emphasize the key importance of reciprocity and cross-species relatedness while understanding the values of hospitality.

Waris Shah's buffaloes invite us to ask new questions and invent new ethical possibilities, particularly in the context of Punjab, where the culturally rooted ethos of hospitality is often summarized through a popular saying, *jee aya nu* (welcome to all who arrive). In the larger South Asian context, hospitality to humans (and more-than-humans) is also captured through a famous Sanskrit phrase, *Atithi Devo Bhava* "the guest is akin to God"—and thereby heightens the ethical potential of breaking the sovereignty of home to constitute a welcome to the Divine Other. Taneja (2018, 91–94) finds another cultural expression for such an ethics of hospitality—the moral act of *gharib nawazi*, or hospitality to strangers that carries the "ethics of nameless intimacy."<sup>8</sup> These grounded constructs, while continuing to shape the values of welcome and acceptance, suggest that the ethical act of *opening* the door must precede the identity of the newcomer.

When the newcomers are more-than-human Others, their acceptance engenders an unreserved possibility of rethinking the home. Whether as penguins who remain rightful inhabitants of the shoreline of Sydney Harbor (Van Dooren, 2014, 77–78), stray dogs whose right to hospitality remains contested in postinvasion Iraq (Leep, 2018, 58–64), or monarch butterflies who migrate, are welcomed, die, and are mourned by Haraway's (2016, 141–43) speculatively fabulated Camille generations, their acceptance provides opportunities for redefining belonging, difference, and indifference at the *domus* (Dave, 2023). In Pakistan, the construction of novel pigeon lofts within the home for European racer pigeons allows many pigeon flyers to deconstruct this space and take it as a site for multispecies worldmaking. When captured as spies across the India-Pakistan border, these pigeons invite us to ask how the appropriation of the home by humans transforms the possibility of hospitality into hostility. Their very arrival exposes the contradiction and entwinement, exclusion and incorporation, and disassociation and connection shaping the values of acceptance and refusal in South Asia. While normative frameworks of hospitality and hostility, as I have argued in this article, largely operate through the mechanism of *badal* (reciprocity) within South Asia, it requires deconstruction of the home as a sovereign space to cultivate the potential of welcoming humans and other critters. The ethics of hospitality to more-than-human Others, an unconditional acceptance prior to their determination as foreigners or intruders, is an understanding of the Other in one's personal universe and a rediscovery of the home through constantly violating its boundaries.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I wrote the initial draft of this article while living in Toronto, the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (a.k.a. the Six Nations Confederacy), the Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. I reworked the article in Canberra, the land of the Ngambri and Ngunnawal people. I gratefully acknowledge these Indigenous nations for their guardianship of these lands and pay my respect to the elders—past, present, and emergent.

<sup>2</sup> For English translation, I use Sant Singh Sekhon's (Shah, [1767] 1978) version published as *The Love of Hir and Ranjha*.

<sup>3</sup> For Persian etymological references on hostile (see Nourai, 2013, 113), on the host (Nourai, 2013, 296), and the guest (Nourai, 2013, 299).

<sup>4</sup> Originating from the Arabic root *badala* (to replace, exchange, alter, convert), *badal* works to foster exchange relationships among people and groups in the Punjab, and in turn, strengthens values of hospitality or hostility (Wehr, 1979, 58–59).

<sup>5</sup> The ethics of absolute hospitality requires unconditionally welcoming whoever arrives *before* imposing any condition. However, Derrida (2005, 7) argues, posing a question at the threshold of the home is at once subtle and fundamental, "an entire politics depends on it, an entire ethics is decided by it." That is,

- the guest may not be denied an opportunity for verbal exchanges; “hospitality consists in doing everything to address the other, to accord him, even to ask him his name, while keeping this question from becoming a ‘condition.’”
- <sup>6</sup>This paper does not offer a geo-political or historical analysis regarding the intrusion of spy pigeons at the India-Pakistan border, nor does it untangle the perplexity of importing pigeons for *sport* and capturing pigeons for *espionage* in South Asia. For such discussion, see Kavesh (2023a).
- <sup>7</sup>Donna Haraway (2015, 8–9), for example, eloquently explains how experimental pigeon lofts are spaces where networks of relationships are formed, and where pigeons transform people into talented colombophiles [French for ‘lovers of pigeons’], who reciprocally transform pigeons into trust-worthy voyageurs [French for ‘carrier or racing pigeons’].
- <sup>8</sup>Through the ethics of *gharib nawazi* (or hospitality offered to strangers), the stranger (*gharib*) receives absolute hospitality, for instance, at Sufi shrines or Gurdwaras where the presence of langar halls ensures food to thousands of people belonging to different societal groups on daily basis without being posed any question first.

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