Ching Lam Janice LAW
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
https://orcid: 0009-0009-0382-4607
https://doi.org/10.26881/kg.2025.2.01

Host, Guest, Enemy: Rethinking Digital Colonialism through Derrida's Aporia of Hospitality

Abstract

This paper rethinks digital colonialism on social media platforms and the infrastructural dominance of big tech corporations from the Global North through the lens of Jacques Derrida's aporetic concept of hospitality. While digital platforms often brand themselves as spaces of openness and global connectivity, they enact a form of conditional hospitality that mirrors colonial structures of control: users from the Global South are invited as guests, yet only within tightly controlled, surveilled, and extractive frameworks. They are welcome, but only as long as they do not threaten the sovereignty of the host—here, the tech corporation that controls the "home" of the platform. Derrida's distinction between conditional and unconditional hospitality allows us to interrogate these dynamics with philosophical depth. Conditional hospitality, tied to rights, laws, and borders, always affirms the mastery of the host. In digital terms, it manifests in algorithmic gatekeeping, linguistic hegemony, and exploitative datafication—welcoming the Global South only when it serves the host's

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule ponownie rozważamy kwestię cyfrowego kolonializmu na platformach mediów społecznościowych oraz dominacji infrastrukturalnej wielkich korporacji technologicznych z globalnej Północy przez pryzmat aporetycznej koncepcji gościnności Jacques'a Derridy. Chociaż platformy cyfrowe często przedstawiają się jako przestrzenie otwartości i globalnej łączności, w rzeczywistości stosują one formę warunkowej gościnności, która odzwierciedla kolonialne struktury kontroli: użytkownicy z globalnego Południa są zapraszani jako goście, ale tylko w ramach ściśle kontrolowanych, nadzorowanych i eksploatacyjnych ram. Są mile widziani, ale tylko tak długo, jak długo nie zagrażają suwerenności gospodarza – w tym przypadku korporacji technologicznej, która kontroluje „dom" platformy. Rozróżnienie Derridy między gościnnością warunkową i bezwarunkową pozwala nam zbadać tę dynamikę z filozoficzną głębią. Warunkowa gościnność, związana z prawami, przepisami i granicami, zawsze potwierdza dominację gospodarza. W kategoriach

interest. Conversely, Derrida's ideal of unconditional hospitality—the impossible but necessary openness to the anonymous, undocumented Other—demands a radical ethics that would decentre platform sovereignty and open up digital infrastructures to genuine plurality, even at the cost of control and stability. The paper argues that tech platforms' self-image as "hosts" becomes ethically untenable when their hospitality turns into hostility: when content moderation perpetuates structural racism, when users are exploited as unpaid digital laborers, and when environmental burdens are externalised onto vulnerable communities. Drawing on Derrida's claim that hospitality is always haunted by its possibility of turning into hostility, I propose a deconstructive critique of digital inclusion narratives. Rather than advocating for a naïve digital openness, this paper calls for a reconfiguration of the digital commons through Derrida's aporetic lens—acknowledging the impossibility of absolute hospitality while striving toward a more just, heterogeneous, and decolonised digital future.

Keywords: Jacques Derrida, Hospitality, Digital Colonialism, Digital Justice.

cyfrowych przejawia się to w algorytmicznej kontroli dostępu, hegemonii językowej i wyzysku danych – przyjmowaniu globalnego Południa tylko wtedy, gdy służy to interesom gospodarza. Z drugiej strony, idea bezwarunkowej gościnności Derridy – niemożliwa, ale niezbędna otwartość na anonimowego, nieposiadającego dokumentów Innego – wymaga radykalnej etyki, która zdecentralizowałaby suwerenność platform i otworzyła infrastrukturę cyfrową na prawdziwą pluralność, nawet kosztem kontroli i stabilności. W artykule argumentuję, że postrzeganie platform technologicznych jako „gospodarzy" staje się nie do utrzymania z etycznego punktu widzenia, gdy ich gościnność zamienia się w wrogość: gdy moderowanie treści utrwala strukturalny rasizm, gdy użytkownicy są wykorzystywani jako nieopłacani pracownicy cyfrowi, a obciążenia środowiskowe są przenoszone na wrażliwe społeczności. Opierając się na twierdzeniu Derridy, że gościnność zawsze niosą ze sobą ryzyko przekształcenia się w wrogość, proponuję dekonstruktywną krytykę narracji dotyczących cyfrowej integracji. Zamiast opowiadać się za naiwną otwartością cyfrową, niniejszy artykuł wzywa do rekonfiguracji cyfrowych dóbr wspólnych poprzez aporetyczną perspektywę Derridy – uznając niemożliwość absolutnej gościnności, jednocześnie dążąc do bardziej sprawiedliwej, heterogenicznej i zdekolonizowanej cyfrowej przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: Jacques Derrida, gościnność, kolonializm cyfrowy, sprawiedliwość cyfrowa.

Introduction

We are living in a highly digitalized world, where infrastructures are designed not merely to connect, but also to condition participation. While the rhetoric of openness and universality characterises the digital age, the actual architecture of social media platforms and technological ecosystems is deeply asymmetrical, governed by corporations from the Global North that invisibly decide who may enter, speak, stay, or be heard. These platforms present themselves as "hosts", extending the illusion of global hospitality. But what kind of welcome is truly being offered?

This paper rethinks digital colonialism through the lens of Jacques Derrida's aporetic concept of hospitality, focusing on the governance and extractive logic of digital platforms. Platform moderation, algorithmic regulation, and datafication operate according to a structure of **conditional hospitality**: one that affirms the host's sovereignty and invites the Other only under strict terms. Users are welcomed not as equals, but as extractable, traceable, and ultimately disposable guests. In this way, digital infrastructures replicate colonial paradigms: access is granted only to those who remain guests. At the same time, Derrida insists on the necessity of unconditional hospitality: an impossible but ethical openness to the absolute, anonymous Other who arrives without name, reason, or permission. It is precisely this impossibility that constitutes ethics: a responsibility that cannot be fulfilled yet still demands a response.

Through this Derridean framework, this paper interrogates how social media platforms enact a form of digital colonialism that cloaks hostility in the language of welcome. From algorithmic filtering to environmental externalities, and from content moderation to surveillance, the guest is always at risk of becoming the enemy. Rather than advocating for a naïve digital openness, this paper calls for a rethink of the digital commons as an aporetic space where decisions must be made without certainty, and where justice begins with responsibility for those we cannot fully receive. In this tension between the possible and the impossible, we may begin to imagine a more just, heterogeneous, and decolonised digital future.

The Digital Platform as Sovereign Host

To understand how social media platforms reproduce structures of digital colonialism, we begin by examining their implicit claim to sovereignty. These platforms operate not merely as neutral spaces for exchange, but as self-authorizing hosts that set out the terms of access, participation, and exclusion. This is the logic of conditional hospitality in Derrida's terms: a form of welcome that always affirms the power of the host and presupposes control over borders. "To invite someone, to host them, is to control their coming"[2] decide who enters, when, and under what conditions. Digital platforms determine the rules of speech through opaque content moderation algorithms. They filter visibility and participation through

---

2   J. Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, Stanford 2000, p. 55.

recommendation systems trained on biased datasets. They demand, in every registration, a user's name, identity, location, preferences, sometimes even biometric data (Touch ID, Face ID, Images…). Like the host in conditional hospitality always demands a passport from the guest, platforms welcome users only when they can be documented, classified, and tracked. The "anonymous" Other has no place in the digital architecture of digital extractivism. As Derrida warns, conditional hospitality confirms the "power and propriety of the host" and maintains the distinction between the host and the guest[3]. This conditional welcome is not neutral. It affirms hierarchy: the platform as host, the user as guest. And this guest must remain a guest. The guest cannot and must not challenge the structure, ownership, or sovereignty of the digital space they enter. This is especially evident in how platforms relate to the Global South. While companies extract linguistic data, cultural content, and digital labour from users in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, they rarely design interfaces in local languages, address regional digital needs, or reinvest infrastructure in those communities. The guest is tolerated only so long as it serves the host's interests. This limited right becomes a powerful analogy for today's platform politics: access to speech or presence is permitted only on the condition that it remains non-disruptive, non-threatening, and non-transformative. The user may speak, but only in ways that align with the community guidelines.

This is not only a metaphor. It is also a concrete political and economic structure that governs how content circulates, how voices are amplified or suppressed, and how communities are formed or disbanded. Content created in or about the Global South is often misclassified as "sensitive," "dangerous," or "non-monetisable" due to training data and moderation standards rooted in Western epistemologies[4]. Meanwhile, data extracted from these same regions are used to train AI models that serve advertisers, security agencies, and development agendas far removed from local needs. This is not hospitality. It is a colonially inflected form of digital extractivism masked as inclusion.

Derrida reminds us that conditional hospitality, while structured around notions of welcome and civility, is ultimately grounded in exclusion. The host decides, filters, and selects. Every welcome is also a gate, a threshold that guards against the unpredictable arrival of the Other. In this structure, the host always retains the power to withdraw the invitation, to close the door, to deport. The guest is always vulnerable to becoming an enemy. This appears as a shift that may occur algorithmically, automatically, without appeal. Users flagged as "suspicious," "violating," or "low engagement" may be silenced or removed without explanation[5]. But this apparent generosity is fragile: the line between hospitality and hostility is thin—and, as Derrida shows, already inscribed in the structure of hospitality itself.

---

[3] Ibid. *Op. cite.*, 25.

[4] A. Payal, *The Next Billion Users: Digital Life Beyond the West*, Cambridge 2019 p.75–97.

[5] S. U. Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism,* New York 2018, pp. 133–155.

From Hospitality to Hostility: Colonial Violence in Digital Infrastructures

If digital platforms present themselves as hospitable hosts, offering access, visibility, and participation, we must ask: what happens when that hospitality turns hostility? For Derrida, the risk of hospitality collapsing into hostility is not a breakdown of intention or implementation but a structural feature of hospitality itself. Hospitality is always haunted by its limits, its violence, and its exclusions. To welcome is also to choose, to filter, and to exclude, and in doing so, to risk betraying the very principle of welcome. This betrayal is not accidental but constitutive. This is what Derrida called the logic of autoimmunity: the host's attempt to protect itself undermines the very ethical foundations of its openness[6].

This logic is increasingly visible in the operation of digital infrastructures. Platforms that claim with connect to the world often do so through opaque systems of censorship and algorithmic bias. What appears in a user's feed, who gets shadowbanned or demonetized, and whose content is removed are decisions made by machine learning systems trained on partial, politicised datasets. These datasets reflect Euro-American cultural norms, and as a result, they systematically misrecognise or suppress content from the Global South. Posts in minority languages are flagged as spam, political dissent is labelled as extremism, and cultural expression is filtered through epistemologies that are not its own[7]. These exclusions are not aberrations; they are how conditional hospitality functions. The platform welcomes global users only on the condition that they resemble the host, i.e., speak its language, follow its customs, and submit to its logic. The guest is accepted only so long as it remains legible and manageable. The moment their alterity asserts itself, hospitality reverses into hostility.

This is not limited to content. The very infrastructure of artificial intelligence is built on the exploitation of invisible digital labour from the Global South. Millions of workers in Venezuela, Kenya, the Philippines, and other postcolonial nations are paid sub-minimum wages to label images, annotate speech, and train the machine learning models that power platforms globally[8]. These workers as the "ghost workers" of the digital economy remain nameless, unseen, and uncredited. They are structurally necessary but ethically disposable. They are not invited as guests into the platform's home; they are kept outside the house entirely, working at the border of its construction. Even more troubling is the environmental cost of digital expansion, which is disproportionately borne by the very regions excluded from digital power. Data centres require enormous energy inputs and water resources; e-waste is exported to African and South Asian countries; and lithium and cobalt mining devastates Indigenous lands in Latin America and the Congo[9]. The digital

---

6   J. Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, Stanford 2005, pp. 123–124.

7   S. U. Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, New York 2018, pp. 102–135.

8   M. L. Gray and S. Suri, *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass*, Boston 2019, pp. 27–56.

9   K. Crawford, *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*, New Haven 2021, pp.58–90.

guest, it turns out, arrives at a cost that the host refuses to acknowledge. What appears as a frictionless interface in the Global North is sustained by ecological and human violence in the Global South. This is not hospitality, but rather an extraction masquerading as inclusion.

Derrida's concept of autoimmunity offers a compelling lens for understanding this dynamic. Platforms assert their openness through a politics of controlled access: they must appear welcoming to gain legitimacy yet constantly defend their internal coherence through exclusionary mechanisms. This defensive reflex ultimately corrodes the ethical claim of hospitality. By protecting the integrity of the host's sovereignty, the host ends up betraying its own ethical obligation. "To protect itself, the immune system may attack the very thing it was meant to defend."[10] Hospitality becomes a self-defeating gesture, preserving the appearance of openness while enacting structural closure. This means that hospitality is always at risk of turning into its opposite. The guest becomes the threat; the Other becomes the enemy. But this is not merely a reaction to perceived disruption, but the very logic of conditional hospitality. Every boundary drawn to protect the host's home doubles as a potential act of violence. The host claims to welcome, but in welcoming, filter, sort, and exclude. The violence is not outside hospitality; it is internal to it.

In the digital realm, this results in a dissonance: the rhetoric of inclusion, openness, and connection coexists with practices of filtering, extraction, and abandonment.

Platform hospitality is thus neither a failure nor a hypocrisy. Rather, it is a paradoxical structure that demands both welcome and control, both openness and regulation. The more the platform seeks to immunise itself from risk, whether through moderation, algorithmic policing, or geopolitical distance, the more it compromises the very ethical foundation of its welcome.

The conditional hospitality of digital platform inherits the logic of colonial governance: it welcomes in order to extract, includes in order to monitor, and offers presence while foreclosing belonging. This is the asymmetry that sustains digital colonialism: the host who appears generous, but only to the extent that generosity reaffirms their own mastery.

Unconditional Hospitality: The Ethics of Welcome as the Impossible

If platform hospitality, as we have seen, is always at risk of collapsing into hostility, we must ask: is it still possible to imagine a form of welcome that does not reduce the Other to a guest tolerated only on the host's terms? If the limits of digital hospitality lie in its structures of filtering, exclusion, and autoimmunity, then the ethical horizon must be sought elsewhere, not in regulatory closure, but in the impossible opening of what Derrida calls unconditional hospitality.

In contrast to conditional hospitality, Derrida develops **unconditional hospitality** (also called absolute hospitality, pure hospitality, infinite hospitality, or impossible hospitality, etc.), which demands a radical openness to the Other: an arrival without precondition, invitation, or

---

10 J. Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, New York 2002, p. 427.

identification. To offer unconditional hospitality is not to welcome a known guest, but to welcome the anonymous, undocumented stranger, or even the stranger who might overturn the house. It is to open the door without asking for a name, a reason, or a timeline. For unconditional hospitality, "I must open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner, but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other… without asking of them either reciprocity… or even their names"[11]. Derrida later insists that this form of hospitality is impossible, but also ethically necessary. True hospitality begins not with power or protocol, but with exposure: a letting-go of sovereignty. To welcome the Other unconditionally is to risk oneself: to risk oneself, like disruption, transformation, or even destruction. In this sense, hospitality is not merely a generous act, but an experience of the impossible; a responsibility that cannot be fulfilled yet must still be undertaken[12]. And in this moment of risk, roles may reverse. The host may be overtaken or displaced. "The host becomes the guest of the guest."[13] Genuine hospitality always contains the possibility of hostility—not because it has failed, but because such risk is intrinsic to its very structure. The welcome may collapse; the guest may become the enemy. And yet, this very instability is where ethics begins.

What would such unconditional hospitality look like in the digital realm? To imagine it is to envision a platform that opens itself to users without requiring identification, without pre-categorising them through algorithmic sorting, and without reducing them to data profiles for extraction. It is to conceive of a digital infrastructure where Otherness is allowed to arrive in its singularity, unprocessed and unpredicted. This is not merely a technical design problem—it is a philosophical question. Could a platform remain a platform recognisable, governable, and coherent, if it no longer retained the ability to filter, flag, or remove those who challenge its norms?

Of course not. As Derrida insists, unconditional hospitality is structurally impossible. No host can welcome everyone indefinitely. No infrastructure can support an infinite number of guests. Without protocols, moderation, or borders, the very notion of the host and the space they inhabit would dissolve. But this impossibility is not a reason for dismissal. Instead, it marks the point at which hospitality becomes an ethical demand rather than a strategic function.

For Derrida, unconditional hospitality is a necessary ideal. It serves as a regulative horizon: not something that can be enacted in full, but something that must always orient our decisions, expose their exclusions, and demand accountability[14]. Without this horizon, hospitality becomes pure management and pure administration, i.e., a matter of rules, permissions, and control, stripped of its ethical significance. Hospitality, Derrida reminds us, is not about contracts or conditions. It is grounded in an infinite, non-reciprocal obligation: we are obliged

---

[11] J. Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 25.

[12] J. Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Stanford 1999, pp. 50–52.

[13] J. Derrida, *Hospitalité*, vol. I, Paris- Seuil 2021, p.87.

[14] J. Derrida, "The Principle of Hospitality," *Parallax* 11, no. 1 (2005), p. 6–9.

to be hospitable, even when we cannot fulfil that obligation[15].

Importantly, Derrida acknowledges that unconditional hospitality always requires conditional hospitality. "Since this unconditional hospitality may lead to a perversion of [the] ethics of friendship, we have to condition this unconditionality, to negotiate the relation between this unconditional injunction and the necessary condition to organize this hospitality which means laws, rights, conventions, boarder…"[16] In other words, to prevent absolute hospitality from being reversed into hostility, hospitality must be controlled and conditioned.

This is especially urgent in the digital domain, where platform hospitality is often reduced to compliance, policy, or user experience. The ethics of unconditional hospitality urge us in a different direction—not toward anarchy, but toward radical accountability. Who is flagged, and why? Who is excluded, and on what terms? What assumptions about speech, identity, and value structure the very design of welcome?

True justice in the digital sphere begins not in certainty, but in responsibility to the unforeseeable—to the Other who arrives without identity, without guarantee, and without debt. In such a world, platforms would not only host—they would be hosted by those they once sought to contain. The challenge is not to overcome the paradox of hospitality, but to live within it: to act always in view of that which cannot be fully received, and to let that impossibility keep our welcome open.

Conclusion: Reimagining Hospitality as Ethical Demand

Digital colonialism is not merely a technical, political, or economic problem. It is also a deeply ethical and conceptual one. The infrastructures of our digital world, like platform governance, algorithmic regulation, and extractive data economies, are built upon decisions about who may appear, who must remain hidden, and under what conditions one is permitted to speak or stay. These decisions are not neutral. They are structured through a logic of conditional hospitality that affirms the sovereignty of the host and admits the Other only insofar as it can be named, tracked, and contained. By drawing on Derrida's aporetic thinking of hospitality, this paper has argued that digital inclusion often masks asymmetrical power relations that reduce users, particularly those in the Global South, to guests who are tolerated but not truly welcomed. The logic of welcome, as currently practiced, is shot through with the risk of reversal: every guest can become an enemy, every threshold a site of expulsion. The platform, like the colonial host, offers access only to those who do not threaten its mastery. And yet, Derrida insists that the impossible ideal of unconditional hospitality as welcoming the absolute, anonymous Other without condition, must remain on our horizon. Not because it can be achieved, but because it disrupts our complacency. It forces us to confront the exclusions embedded in every act of welcome. This impossibility does not cancel responsibility; it intensifies it. We are responsible not despite the fact that we cannot fully welcome the Other, but because we cannot.

---

15 G. Kakoliris, "Jacques Derrida on the Ethics of Hospitality", In: *The Ethics of Subjectivity,* London 2015, p.148.

16 Jacques Derrida, "Politics and Friendship," in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971–2001*, Stanford 2002, p. 302.

To reimagine digital justice today is not to propose a universal design, perfect protocol, or total inclusion, as it is impossible. It is rather to recognise that justice emerges in the very act of negotiating with the undecidable, i.e., with the Other who arrives uninvited, unknown, and unknowable. The question is not how to eliminate the tension between control and welcome, but how to remain ethically accountable within it. In this sense, hospitality is not a function of platform design, but it is a way of responding to the world. And justice, if it is to come, will come from living in this aporia without resolution—from remaining open, exposed, and responsible to the stranger who exceeds all our systems of recognition.

Bibliography

Crawford K. *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence.*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2021

Derrida J. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999.

———. *Acts of Religion*. Routledge, New York 2002.

———. *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. Stanford University Press, Stanford 2000.

———. "The Principle of Hospitality." *Parallax* 11, no. 1 (2005): 6–9.

———. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005.

Derrida J. and Dufourmantelle A. *Hospitalité*, vol. I, Séminaire 1995–1996. Paris: Seuil 2021.

Gray M. L. and Suri S. *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 2019.

Kakoliris G.. "Jacques Derrida on the Ethics of Hospitality." In *The Ethics of Subjectivity*, edited by Elvis Imafidon, 137–154. London 2015.

Umoja N. S. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York 2018.

Ching Lam Janice LAW – is a PhD student in Philosophy at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her doctoral research, supervised by Prof. Saulius Geniusas, focuses on rethinking responsibility through the lenses of Levinas, Derrida, and Ricoeur. She currently also serves as a Lecturer at Hong Kong Baptist University and HKU SPACE, where she teaches courses on Philosophy, critical thinking, film and literature. Her research interests include deconstruction, phenomenology and hermeneutics. Email: lawchinglam@outlook.com