

Making space at the table or turning the table? In search of a more just praxis

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Introduction

My choice of this topic is borne out of my own experiences and positionality as a woman of color for whom the metaphor of table and indeed even the idea of hospitality, have become notions which I have both an affinity for and a visceral reaction to. As one of the first generation of South African students of color not only entering historically white universities in South Africa, but now teaching at one, I now sit at tables that people like me were never intended to sit at. I am also the daughter of justice seeking church leaders who fought racism within our own denomination during the height of apartheid. Around our dinner table, many of the informal negotiations which would form the basis for our racial unification as a denomination took place. In a relatively recent Facebook post, I critiqued the notion of “building a longer table, not a higher fence” or some such saying that is popular in depicting hospitality as the answer to exclusion. What I pointed out was that the answer was not to build a longer table, but simply take your place at the table (invited or not) and bring your own chair and cutlery if necessary. I thought I was clever until one of my students – a known campus activist during our student protests for free, decolonized education at universities nationwide – pointed out that actually what was needed was to overturn that table for the unjust space it had created. Or just build your own. The table metaphor, therefore, raises the notion of hospitality and its content. It should not be about merely accommodating, namely building a longer table. And on second thought: wasn’t my suggestion to take up space merely another iteration of a kind of assimilation? A kind of middle-class triumphalism

that forgets that I have enough privilege now to force a space? What my student was pointing out was perhaps the limitations of hospitality and my own limitations to truly think from the margins and to actually reflect on the possible injustice the space is that the table has created.

These thoughts solidified into what I offer tentatively in this chapter as I reflect on the notion of hospitality in times of crises within the context of the conference theme. A great deal has been written over the years on the notion of hospitality and it has been critiqued by many scholars as requiring problematization, so I do not claim to extensively revisit it from scripture or from the wealth of theological writings on it as the length of this reflection does not allow for that. Rather, I wish to trouble the notion and focus on its relationship to a more just praxis with specific reference to the church, grassroots communities, and academy as spaces where many of us find ourselves situated as practical theologians.

Who serves at the table? Exploring reciprocity within the guest/host dynamic

Hospitality, more often than not as Nouwen points out, conjures up images “of tea parties, bland conversation and a general atmosphere of coziness”, dinner party gatherings of friends, and even in the context of local congregations – the welcoming cup of coffee offered by the “hospitality ministry” (Pohl 1999,4). Subsequently, scholars such as Pohl (1999) and Yong (2008) have pointed us both to the richness of this concept within the biblical text, and also the sharp edges of the concept, and the inherent power dynamic between host and guest.





In a world in crises, Christian hospitality is often presented as the answer to marginalization and exclusion. If we would only be “nicer” to those who have no space at the table and assist them to understand the etiquette of our tables, then we will foster diversity and understanding. What is more often than not touched upon is the inherent notion of power often embedded in our well-meaning practices of hospitality – both in the academy and church. Pohl (1999:120) notes the following: “There is a kind of hospitality that keeps people needy strangers while fostering an illusion of relationship and connection, It both disempowers and domesticates guests while it reinforces the host’s power, control, and sense of generosity. It is profoundly destructive to people it welcomes. It is the kind of help, in Philip Hallie’s words, which “fills their hands but breaks their hearts.”

Often the “needy stranger” is welcomed on our own terms. Vaccine inequality has rendered the Global South at the mercy of Northern wealth during COVID 19—and while most of the north has been vaccinated, vaccines now offered by the North are leftovers given to “needy strangers”. In my own field of Theology and Development/Diaconia, this is best articulated by the white savior mentality of some Global North faith based organizations—rooted in a colonial missionary praxis, who bring charitable aid to those in the Global South, but see no need for equitable partnership and mutual respect in their faith based developmental projects. In the context of the migrant crises, we witness again the limits of hospitality, migrants are best welcomed when they practice assimilation into the host culture. Welcome, if conditional, translates into the host remaining in control – or centered in the story. The host remains at the head of the table. Both within the academy and institutional church, those most often on the margins – women, people of color, LGBTQI,¹ etc.– need to learn the institutional language of historically white, patriarchal institutions in order to be offered prize places at those tables, a language which is spoken in the tongues of hegemonic, neocolonial, neoliberal patriarchy. When we cannot or do not want to master this in the name of domestication and resist it, we are no longer welcomed – labelled as “troublemakers”, “angry women” or even in the case of one clergywoman I know, referred to as having “bewitched”

others with her feminist and liberative approach to the biblical text.

I disagree with Pohl’s slightly simplistic answer to this kind of host-guest power dynamic, namely that the best route towards addressing this is through conscious host centered humility (Pohl 1999,120). In an era where “color blindness” builds on the belief that racism does not exist or is an individualized phenomenon and the hegemonies of whiteness and patriarchy remain in place, so-called hosts are blind to power dynamics. They have been comfortably seated at the head of the tables and at the center of discourses for so long, that paternalism rather than humility is the outcome. Addy appropriates Ivan Illich’s notion of conviviality, which he both contrasts and compares to traditional notions of hospitality. Addy (2017, 19) notes that while “a hospitable attitude may be a precursor to conviviality... it still implies that the one offering hospitality defines the terms of the relationship. If one is a guest one is expected to leave and if one stays and becomes a member of the community, hospitality in its original meaning ends!” He also makes the point that conviviality as life together invites a kind of hospitality that recognizes power: “if we are hospitable, we can welcome the stranger and maybe learn something, it may change us or not. If we work for conviviality we do not reckon with the ‘other’ leaving and therefore we have to live together” (Addy 2019, 6).

Letty Russell (2009) points out that it is only when we “decolonize our minds that we begin thinking from the margins rather than from the center. We reframe hospitality as a form of partnership with the ones we call ‘other’ rather than as a form of charity or entertainment.” Inherent in Russell’s challenge is not only the call for both host and guest – those at the margins and at the center – those sitting at the heads of tables and with no seat at those tables – to actively resist patterns of domination. The subaltern may speak, but they will not be heard if hospitality is reduced to inter-personal interactions. My Stellenbosch colleague Robert Vosloo (2003,70), therefore, points out the importance of not limiting hospitality to “I-thou” encounters – “however important these encounters may be”, because “an adequate ethos of hospitality requires structural and institutional concretization.” In other words we cannot be satisfied with a call for the individual humility of individual hosts, but must call for the re-structuring of unjust institutions. This kind of restructuring towards more just struc-

1 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex.

tures and institutions must always start with identifying the idols of power and what constitutes empire in that particular context.

The Accra Confession reminds us that the role of the church is to reject the unjust systems of empire as neoliberal capitalism, which are extractive and which “defy God’s covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable, and the whole of creation from the fullness of life”. Instead God’s economy of grace is “for the household of all creation”, not only that but it declares that the “poor and marginalized are preferential partners” (Pillay 2018, 5). In building an adequate ethos of hospitality which engages empire, then, those often rendered strangers to these systems are our preferred partners in dismantling them. In advocacy work we often talk about speaking up for the “voiceless” and thereby risk reinforcing our host-like privilege, we need to be constantly introspective lest we become unjust hosts – the voiceless have voices, they are just silenced by the systems.

Yong notes a kingdom reversal in the guest-host typology as exemplified by Jesus and the ways that Christ is depicted as both guest and host. What I find interesting in Yong’s discussion of ‘Jesus and hospitality’ is that he points out “that it is precisely in his role as guest that Jesus also announces and enacts, through the Holy Spirit, the hospitality of God” (Yong 2008, 101). As a fellow Pentecostal I must admit to having a somewhat biased affinity for Yong’s pneumatological approach to hospitality, wherein he views the day of Pentecost as signifying “the gift of God, the Holy Spirit that produces many tongues”, and that “many tongues open up the life of the church’s ministry to many practices” and, I would argue, recognition and valuing of diversity. Pentecost redeems the Babel narrative of the chaos of difference, which needs to be controlled by narratives of “all lives matter” and makes difference rather the starting point for not “only speaking in new ways, but actually hearing and understanding each other” so that marginalized voices are not silenced because of the dissonance and perceived chaos they create, but instead valued and listened to as equal around a table of difference where difference is a gift and intrinsically tied to the inalienable dignity of persons (Vosloo 2003, 69; cf. Welker 1994, 230,23). Russel (2009, 71–72) uses the notion of emancipatory difference in her book on hospitality to make the point that difference is a gift that should be honored. In our current struggles for justice, she further makes the important

point that one can even build on relational difference in networks of solidarity and partnership working for a common cause. The struggle for gender or racial justice are examples where having white bodies on picket lines or male clergy advocating for equal treatment of female clergy in synodal spaces prove powerful antidotes to the story of hegemony.

Making space or taking up space? Spatial relations and hospitality

Just as we speak of contested knowledge, so too must we speak of contested spaces when engaging the notion of hospitality (Vosloo 2003, 68). Recently, I read a poem by a young South African poet and activist, Thandi Gamedze, which proclaimed “take up space like it was 1651”. 1652 is the symbolic year of the formal colonization of South Africa by the Dutch. In South Africa, space and place is highly racialized and remains segregated in terms of the intersections of race and class 29 years after the advent of democracy – not least in the church. This is a direct legacy of legislation, which forcibly removed people of color from their land during the colonial and apartheid eras respectively. One sociologist indeed makes the claim that colonialism is a direct product of a perverse interpretation of Christian hospitality (Glanville 2020, 4). This has provoked some of my own discomfort with certain interpretations of hospitality and again highlights the ways in which space has socio-political content and the ways in which people experience hospitality as dependent on their positioning in that space.

Lefebvre (1991, 404) notes that spaces are socially produced and that “social relations, which are concrete abstraction, have no real existence save in and through space. Their underpinning in spatial.” In my country, perhaps like yours, there are no neutral spaces and often, as already implied, spaces are informed by racial and economic configurations of space. Vosloo (2003, 69) reminds us, therefore, that we should: “...not treat values like hospitality as abstract and merely mental phenomena, but they require spatialization. We are painfully aware of the anti-hospitality of forced removals and the cleansing of spaces in the name of order or progress. Hospitality is ...also about making room. For Christians the vision of the space within the Triune life for the whole of creation can serve as motivation for ‘making room.’”



Feminist scholar, Ahmed (2007), makes the point that in a white space², white bodies are at home and Byzzheva (2018, 248) adds that white spaces “demands certain actions and ideas: ways of gaining knowledge, ideas about what knowledge is valuable, what constitutes order in the space ...who gets to be a body-at-home and who gets to be a stranger.” Whiteness is always at home. In higher education, it is often the professor who is the host in the classroom space, thus decolonizing our practical theological curricula will require far more than reviewing our reading lists or inviting guest lecturers from marginalized communities (albeit a start!) if we continue to replicate the normativity of whiteness in theological education spaces – an act which can also be perpetuated by assimilated educators of color (cf. Andraos 2019, 200; cf. Goto 2019). This is no different in church spaces – more especially “multiracial churches” in South Africa. I have had conversations with numerous friends of color who attend such churches (which are inevitably evangelical and white led) listening to their pain of exclusion – despite these congregations often having an almost even split in terms of racial composition. In these churches, even those who have risen to some leadership position, find themselves guests in terms of their own congregation’s normative whiteness when they speak out against racial injustice. The reciprocity they once believed undergirded their “at home-ness” at such a table, is soon discovered to be nothing more than accommodation.

Volf (1996) identifies one aspect of exclusion as assimilation as “it can entail erasure of separation, not recognizing the other as someone who in his or her otherness belongs to a pattern of interdependence, the other then emerges as an inferior being who must either be assimilated by being made like the self or subjugated to the self.” Volf (1996, 146) goes on to make the important point that power hierarchies cannot usually only be struggled against in the quest for reciprocity but that the “heart of embrace can be reached only through self-sacrifice” (Mark 10:41-45). Hospitality that recognizes space as having the content of structural injustices, then, requires a form of *kenosis* – especially from those with power in such spaces. I wonder what the incarnation offers as the ultimate kenotic act of a God

who is the host of space and time and yet enters a specific space and time as guest? It should be remembered that those on the receiving end of structural injustices are already self-sacrificing and that often just putting their bodies in spaces which are unsafe for them is enough, having been created by systems that have long questioned their humanity. African women theologians point out, for example, the importance of being hermeneutically suspicious of hospitality narratives attached to women in the bible. These should be interrogated as they often reinforce the servant role of women from whom servility and self-abasement are expected by patriarchy and who have even been violated in the name of hospitality (Oduyeye 2001, 46–47).

Another question that arises is: who has the power to decide where home is? One well known black South African pastor, who has since disavowed his faith having being wounded by the struggle for racial justice in my city, wrote a book shortly after democracy where he called to “disband the white church”. His book was in response to the segregation of churches and also questioned the practice of some multiracial churches (mainly white led) at that time bussing in black congregants from townships to majority white parts of the city. At the time I was ambivalent and even friends of his saw this call as an affront to the embrace of African hospitality. Thinking back on it now, he was asking: why in a city like ours should black Christians still be guests? Rather than challenging our spatial dynamics as churches in the city, we have simply replicated spatial injustices and power hierarchies between host and guest. I now wonder whether that isn’t exactly the kind of *kenotic* action we needed to call for.

In recent months I have become fascinated by Trygve Wyller’s use of Foucault’s heterotopic spaces within the context of my own field of Diaconia/Theology and Development. I do not claim to be a scholar of Foucault, but Wyller’s use of the term is possibly helpful in this discussion, as it argues that the lives and social contexts of the marginalized should not only be seen as “targets for transformation”, but rather that their “experiences and strategies for survival and dignity are understood as epistemological starting point” (Gunnes 2017, 54). There is a reversal of power here, which recognizes the agency of former objects of hospitality (migrants, homeless, poor, etc.) as possessing agency in spaces (Gunnes 2017, 55). In the case of migrant ministry, more especially, there has been the tendency to start from church as philanthropic host, welcoming a “helpless stranger” as

2 “White space is one that is normed along the values that continuously privilege white bodies and whiteness (epistemologically, morally, socially and emotionally)” (Ahmed 2007).



needy guest. In a week long block Masters module offered to clergy, myself, and the co-facilitator of this course, have hosted the course at both an inner city congregation and a faith based organization, rather than at the university. Although the students often believe that it's a course on diaconia/church and community development, our aim is to assist clergy to interrogate power and the ways in which race, class, marginalization operates so that they can engage more consciously and effectively as churches in community. On the second day of the course, which happens to be a Sunday, they attend a migrant led service which is conducted completely in Shona (a language spoken by Zimbabwean migrants to South Africa) and hosted by Zimbabwean Christians. They are then invited for the weekly after church meal of that congregation and eat a traditional Shona meal with them after the service – often with their hands. As facilitators, we do not attend and leave the hosting to our Zimbabwean colleagues completely. Year after year, it is noted as one of the most transformative moments in their week long course. This moment is transformative, I believe, because not only are the clergy – who are usually almost always hosts in their congregation – stripped of this power/duty, but they are hosted by those who we traditionally view as guests in South African spaces. They are essentially decentered in this heterotopic space.

Turning the tables/building tables?

Perhaps one of my favorite scriptures is that of Jesus turning over the tables in the temple, not least because in recent years I have had to answer numerous questions on the limits of anger in justice praxis, both from individual Christians and at race and church forums. Jesus' overturning of the tables was of course in response to the religious leaders' unjust gain and exploitation of the poor and so going back to my student's call to rather overturn the table and build new ones, I wondered whether in an unjust world some radical power reversals aren't required to induce more just praxis? Yong (2009:102) points out that in the various meal scenes in the Gospels, not only do we see that "the most eager recipients of the divine hospitality were not the religious leaders, but the poor and oppressed", but also that "Jesus calls for the religious leaders to repent of their self-serving interests precisely in order to share in the meal and fellowship with repentant and forgiven sinners." Yong goes on to point out that:

To do so Jesus frequently breaks the rules of hospitality, upsets the social conventions of meal fellowship (e.g. Jesus does not wash before dinner), and even goes so far as to rebuke his hosts. Luke shows that it is Jesus, not the religious leaders, who is the broker of God's authority, and it is on this basis that Jesus establishes, through the power of the Spirit, the inclusive hospitality of the kingdom. This involves not only women and children and slaves, but also the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the male who are the oppressed and marginalized of the ancient world (Luke 14:21).

I find this piece interesting, because it mentions notions such as repentance and rebuke as part of Jesus understanding of a kingdom/reign of God's hospitality. Neither of these notions fit into the 'warm and fuzzy' romanticized understandings of hospitality, which are conflict free, and it leads me to wonder why we haven't embraced discomfort and even conflict as part of co-constructing spaces where all are welcome. During the South African student #FeesMustFall protests for free, decolonized education, students were partly protesting the fact that more especially poor, black students, did not feel welcome in university spaces which were essentially still built on colonial and exclusionary praxis. If I think about it now, they were calling for institutional repentance of a lack of hospitality to poor, black bodies over centuries and into the present. Indeed, Russell (2009, 81) points out that one of the starting points of reframing hospitality is acknowledging the inhospitality of colonial practice and the ways in which white power and privilege have affected us all. The African proverb "the child who is not embraced by the village will burn down the village just to feel the warmth", became frighteningly real as we saw our campuses literally burn during this time. In the years that have followed since the protests between 2015–2017, I lament the fact that we have not adequately heeded the students' calls for institutional repentance in their calls for decolonized education as radical hospitality.

So what of simply building our own tables? In my own university, myself and a few other colleagues in various faculties have often wondered whether we should start a black academic caucus. Such spaces are examples of building our own tables, when we know that the other tables often do not welcome or truly listen to us as a minoritized "stranger" (as strange as that may seem in a majority black country, historically white universities remain racialized). In our current global political climate, such actions are viewed as polarizing and undesirable



with regards to building the ubiquitous unity of sameness we seem to believe we are called to. If viewed from another perspective, it is in actual inditement on the lack of institutional hospitality colleagues find in such spaces, where their humanity is still marginalized and so such spaces are created as a means to resistance by creating our own safe and more welcoming spaces where we are no longer strangers, but belong at the table. One thing that I am sure of is that these tables are borne out of a longing for just hospitality and are not a rejection or negation of hospitality. If we truly and justly love our neighbor – by listening to understand the pain of those marginalized by systems and then truly welcome them as equals – then such separate tables will not be necessary.

One of the practices I have been inspired by, in turning the table on conventional notions of hospitality and perhaps even building her own table as one which welcomes all, is the teaching praxis of my colleague in Practical Theology, Nobuntu Penxa-Matholeni. She has been the champion of teaching a Practical Theology module in the indigenous language of isiXhosa – which would be the first of its kind at Stellenbosch University and one of the first in South Africa – as a form of decolonized teaching praxis. In universities in South Africa, indigenous languages (other than Afrikaans which was imposed as the language of the former oppressor)³ are not seen as “at home” in the academy which still largely centers around western epistemologies and language. Although the module hasn’t been officially integrated yet, she has been introducing indigenous Xhosa constructs – much as she does in her own scholarly work – into the pastoral care curriculum at our faculty. When a first language English speaking student of color mentioned the ways that he was enriched by a particular amaXhosa notion as applied within Practical Theology – I was reminded that this module is engaging in radical hospitality. Rev Penxa Matholeni is inviting students to cross borders of language and culture in a new shared classroom space, which directly chal-

lenges the exclusionary whiteness that has been institutionalized in such spaces for years. What my colleague is doing is not only overturning inhospitable tables, but also building her own and inviting everyone to share in the bounty and beauty of amaXhosa culture and ways of being in the world – ways which continue to be marginalized in spaces like ours. According to Penxa-Matholeni (2021), the isiXhosa metaphor *Ubuhlobo* brings us all to the place of not owning and proposes a different paradigm. This can be used in family therapy. In this paradigm of “*ubuhlobo*”, which is suitable for storying pastoral care, no one is a stranger—the stories, our stories-together equal God’s story, bind us together beyond blood relations (cf. Russell 2009, 102).

Conclusion: firesides, not tables?

In this chapter, I have attempted to question the power dynamic inherent in the notion of hospitality as popularly understood: which discourses are centered in these understandings of hospitality (whose stories matter)? Who owns the spaces and places within which such hospitality takes place? In essence, I have implied whether the notion of hospitality as table fellowship is at all helpful in avoiding patronizing and exclusive forms of engagement and whether such tables shouldn’t simply be overturned and new ones built. I lastly argued that there is sometimes a need for the stranger to build their own tables and offered the example of a colleague, who in line with decolonizing praxis, was building her own and then inviting all to share in its bounty. In concluding I return to the notion of building “faithful connections”. In reading my interpretation of her praxis, my colleague asked the question as to why I was even using the table as metaphor – why not the more decolonized notion of fireside where there are no tables and chairs and everyone is simply seated on the ground? For my ancestors, and certainly in many of our traditional cultures today, the fireside is a place of ‘at home’, of communal storytelling, eating, dancing, engagement, and also bears spiritual significance. It is a space of faithful connection. Unlike a fireplace, we sit around it and share in its mutual warmth and there is space for all around a bonfire. God is the host. It is not lost on me that Yahweh appeared in the burning bush or the start of the church began with tongues of fire, or that after his resurrection Jesus invites his disciples to a fireside barbeque or “braai” in South African parlance. I

3 There is currently a complex debate raging regarding Afrikaans. Afrikaans is also spoken by people of color in South Africa and is even argued to have originated more from the slave and indigenous communities than the Dutch colonizers, however, during Apartheid it was imposed by the government on a majority black and non-Afrikaans speaking majority as the language of education.



note also that fire in these events is invitational and often requires courage by the invitation of God as host. In searching for faithful connections in an era of fear, distrust, and polarization we often seek to claim host status in ways that reinforce power and privilege by inviting the other to our tables. Perhaps what is needed, is for us to recognize that we are all dependent on the fire and invited by God's Spirit to a praxis that needs no tables at all.

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