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**Building community through hospitality:
Indirect obligations to reciprocate in a transnational speech community**

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Abstract

Anthropologists largely draw on the theoretical assumption that the interactional practices underlying hospitality are akin to those of gifting. Yet, by focusing on the giving and receiving of hospitality, such scholarship has failed to address these exchanges' third element: reciprocating. Faced with this, this article reflects on travelling among Esperanto-speakers in France, aiming to grasp how hospitality gains prominence in turning people into fully-fledged Esperanto-speakers through promoting intercultural, multilingual, and cross-border exchanges. Asking what Mauss, Pitt-Rivers, and Sahlins would have written about reciprocity had they come across backpackers, couchsurfers, and Esperanto-speakers, I explore why reciprocity and hospitality are vital for the existence of the Esperanto-speaking community and, more broadly, what is the place of reciprocity in hospitality. From the ethnography presented, I argue that hospitality can also emerge as a community-building mechanism, stemming from indirect obligations to reciprocate that may paradoxically constitute both short-lived dyadic relationships and long-standing communities.

Keywords: hospitality; reciprocity; community-building; speech community; transnational community; indirect obligation; nationality; internationality; scale shift; Esperanto.

Word-count: 8,943

Introduction

September 2016. As the metro approached Bastille station, I thought about how I should introduce myself and first interact with my interlocutors-to-be. I had settled down in Paris a few days before starting my fieldwork, curious and determined to understand how the international auxiliary language Esperanto had become intrinsically connected to radical politics in France. Reaching the headquarters of the association Espéranto-France after a short

walk from Place de la Bastille, it was time to decide: once I go in, should I talk to people in French or Esperanto?

Ultimately, the members of Espéranto-France – gathered for a debate on that Monday evening – made that decision before me: as an Esperanto-speaking Brazilian national interacting with French Esperantists, Esperanto would be our working language. An understandable choice, given that Esperanto was designed to establish a linguistic middle ground for people from different national and linguistic backgrounds to communicate on a more levelled playing field, without resorting to anyone's first language. Yet, an unexpected methodological-analytical issue soon emerged: my interlocutors repeatedly questioned my decision to concentrate my research in Paris, posing comments such as 'are you going to spend one year studying Esperantists in Paris? No, you're an Esperantist, you have to travel!' or 'I have Esperanto-speaking friends in Nantes. I'll tell them about you, and they'll be more than happy to host a Brazilian there!' Along the same lines, I was frequently asked to host or offer walking tours to Esperantists visiting Paris during my stay, which I found myself doing numerous times.

Being established in the French capital would enable me to meet long-term interlocutors and search archives on the political practices associated with the language. Yet, as a consequence of Esperantists' kind insistence during my initial months in Paris, I accepted an offer that Espéranto-France made to me by e-mail. In the capacity of 'the foreign Esperantist' (*la eksterlanda esperantisto*, as the e-mail spelt out), I was invited to visit 15 local branches of this association across continental France and to give talks in Esperanto about social anthropology and my home country. During this month-long tour, my travel expenses would be covered by these association's local branches and I would be duly hosted and fed by their members. These invitations forced me to reconsider what was effectively at stake in the Esperantist understanding of travelling and hospitality, which fleshes out how full membership in this transnational community is closely linked to travelling across borders, speaking Esperanto, performing one's nationality, as well as hosting and being hosted by fellow Esperantists.

From Mauss to Candea, several anthropologists have argued that the interactional practices of hospitality are formally akin to those of gifting, highlighting how both exchanges dwell on reciprocity and generate relationships. Yet, in drawing such parallels, this scholarship has focused on the giving and receiving of hospitality, failing to pay analogous attention to the third constitutive element of these exchanges: reciprocating. Building on participant observation and semi-structured interviews in Paris and in many Esperanto-mediated trips and instances of hospitality in 2016-2017, this article asks: why are reciprocity and hospitality practices vital for the existence of the Esperanto-speaking community? To what extent does this language rely on travelling to be spoken? More broadly, what is the place of reciprocity in hospitality?

In seeking to explain the seemingly self-evident emic connection between hosting, speaking a language, and joining a community, this article argues that such travelling opportunities configure hospitality not as a set of practices to establish long-term interpersonal commitments between hosts and guests or to enable tourism in the first place. Instead, it emerges as a mechanism that builds community across long distances, prevailing among Esperantists, as well as among many sorts of global travellers, couchsurfers, and backpackers.

I illustrate how reciprocity keeps the gift on giving beyond the framework of one-time hospitable encounters by exploring the importance of hospitality for the dynamics of the Esperanto community and, consequently, for the very endurance of Esperanto. As a language that is not compulsorily, officially, nor customarily spoken anywhere, the further existence of its transnational speech community draws on the regular practices of travelling and hosting that bring its speakers together. After unpacking the relevance of reciprocity for hospitality and gift-giving, this article inquires into the interweavings of reciprocity and community-building. This is done by exploring how practising Esperanto and offering hospitality to fellow speakers from abroad emerge as key for the continuous (re)production of the Esperanto-speaking community.

The ethnography of an Esperanto-mediated hospitable encounter on the French Atlantic Coast enables us to examine the Esperanto-speaking community and unpack how the performance of national identities and stereotypes gain currency in the unfolding of host/guest and fellow citizen/stranger relationships. Within communities of global travellers, the intercultural exchanges initiated in a hospitable encounter are expected to endure. Yet, rather than establishing long-distance reciprocity as the continuation of the exchange initiated by the original host/giver, the form of reciprocity at play continuously develops new chains of exchanges. These, in turn, may not produce long-term dyadic commitments but, alternatively, instantiate long-standing transnational communities. Ultimately, diverting the analytical focus of hospitality from giving and receiving to reciprocating invites us to reconsider generalized reciprocity as a pervasive community-building mechanism, encompassing wider forms of reciprocal exchange.

Giving, receiving, and reciprocating hospitality

Hospitality stands out as a primary aspect of the empirical concerns of any ethnographer, even when this is not the focus of their analytical attention. Once in the field, the first tasks of the ethnographer involve fostering welcome among their interlocutors and finding shelter, which almost necessarily lies in negotiations and practices of hospitality.

As Candea and Da Col (2012) aptly point out, hospitality has been among the central themes of anthropology since Mauss' early parallels between the interactional practices of hospitality and those of gift exchange. Through an investigation of gift-giving in 'archaic' societies, Mauss (1990) inquires into what moves receivers of an object given to feel obligated to pay it back. Justifying the obligation to reciprocate as a result of the inalienability of the gift, Mauss resorts to the Maori term *hau* to argue that persons and things are mutually constitutive: as a part of the giver is passed on to the receiver, the act of giving creates a social bond that compels the latter to reciprocate. Hence, the Maussian definition of gift economies (which is not without criticism, see Laidlaw, 2000 and Graeber, 2001) revolves around the obligations to give, to receive and, most importantly, to reciprocate – the latter binding people together for as long as the exchange lasts.

The potential to derive social relationships from these three obligations also characterizes another kind of exchange: that of hospitality. 'Hospitality, like gift-giving, involves reciprocity, a

tension between spontaneity and calculation, generosity and parasitism, friendship and enmity, improvisation and rule; like the gift, hospitality encompasses distant agents' (Candea and Da Col, 2012: 1-2). In welcoming strangers to their homes, villages, and countries, hosts make the first move towards establishing a relationship with their visitors. These are, in turn, imbued with the moral, internalized obligation to receive and reciprocate this act of hospitality one day according to their possibilities.

Analysing how a given host community form bonds with, exposes itself to, and seals itself from outsiders through hospitality (Boudou, 2012), anthropologists have systematically explored ways of tackling the unknown character of the stranger. Boas (1887), for instance, portrays outsiders being received among the Inuit through duels that measured the strangers' performance against the host community's standards. Likewise, Lévi-Strauss (1949) scrutinizes how the Nambikwara developed an institutionalized form of indigenous foreign policy, in which examining the strangers' adornments marked the outset of prospective hospitable and amicable exchanges. Once welcomed through practices varying from duels and feasts to passport checks, those of outside origin are frequently labelled visitors and guests. Such status depends on the guest recognizing that their role is founded on specific rights and responsibilities, which must be constantly observed during their stay (Pitt-Rivers, 1968). Additionally, their partial incorporation into the host community rests on the expectation of their departure: if outsiders settle down permanently, their continuous status as guests becomes questionable.

If this scholarship is justifiably focused on giving and receiving, then how can reciprocating be made equally at home in this debate? Discussing the circulation of gifts and hospitality within Euro-American families, Godbout (1997) underlines the reciprocity at play during festive seasons such as Christmas. As families gather, the most important part of the gift of hospitality – put differently, its *hau* – is each other's presence: there would be no reason to go to someone's house for a reunion if the hosts were not there. However, family reciprocity tends to be imbalanced, given that parents typically assume the role of reunion hosts and core food providers.

Commenting on distinct kinds of family arrangements, Sahlins (1972) coined the term 'generalized reciprocity' to explain exchanges within a household or village. Measured against balanced and negative reciprocity, the generalized form prevails among close kin, when those who have more to offer assist those in need due to their kinship obligations. Here the vagueness of the obligation and the asymmetry in reciprocity are not taken as offence, but as tokens of responsibility: they convey the idea that the relationship between parties – such as parents and children – will last for long such that, eventually, the grown-up children will be better off than their parents and will materialize their commitment to the latter by giving in turn. Still regarding close kin, Lévi-Strauss uses reciprocity to explain the general principle of kinship ties: 'like exogamy, the prohibition of incest is a rule of reciprocity, for I will give up my daughter or my sister only on condition that my neighbours do the same' (1969: 62).

Both Lévi-Strauss and Sahlins read reciprocity in rather contrasting ways: while the former underlines the endless debts between woman-givers and woman-takers, the latter emphasizes the open-ended responsibility involved in exchanges among kin who do not expect counter-

gifts or counter-hospitality in return (Graeber, 2001). Contrasting as they might be, these two approaches (as well as Godbout's) bring a novel element to the reciprocity debate: they account, ethnographically, for cases in which reciprocation takes the form of an indirect obligation, oriented not towards the initial giver, but towards their kin from other generations, potential kin, or fellow villager.

The imbalance of some individuals assuming the role of host/giver more frequently than others may not be an issue when a sense of permanent mutual commitment prevails under the guise of 'we are family' (Godbout, 1997). This, however, may not be the case when one enlarges the exchange circle: offering a meal to a stranger from afar, for instance, would likely lead to a one-time encounter, as the physical distance and lack of familiarity with the stranger would probably mean never to meet this person again. Regardless of the likely absence of reciprocity, such exchanges with strangers are all too frequently initiated.

While mapping out the ways in which hospitality regulates and makes relationships, anthropologists have offered insights on how expectations on giving and hosting in turn can be kept vague among those whose closeness facilitates the exchange to be continued. Nonetheless, in discussing international travelling and the welcoming of foreigners, the strand of literature that proposes parallels between hospitality and gifting tend to examine primarily the two first elements that constitute hospitality exchanges. In doing so, it largely downplays the role of reciprocity in this equation and limits the analytical validity of the theoretical parallels suggested. In the face of this issue, what if we place reciprocity at the heart of the anthropology of hospitality instead?

Welcoming community-building into the anthropology of hospitality

In Euro-American contexts, hospitality is often conveyed as a commodity (Gregory, 1982), with tourists being entitled to enjoy commercial lodging or guided tours for as long as these services are paid for. This is not, however, the case for non-commercial hospitality. When acts of hospitality are conveyed as favours and do not end in a one-time commercial exchange, how do host-guest relationships develop, and how does one know that the gift of hospitality – and the moral debt it generated – has been duly reciprocated?

Thinking about travelling in the 21st century, a major modality that has been gaining attention is couchsurfing. Embodying sharing economies, couchsurfing practices are predicated on reciprocal exchanges. Most importantly, the mechanisms that operationalize them take community-building as their founding principle. According to Couchsurfing.com:

We envision a world where everyone can explore and create meaningful connections with the people and places they encounter. Building meaningful connections across cultures enables us to respond to diversity with curiosity, appreciation, and respect. The appreciation of diversity spreads tolerance and *creates a global community* (Couchsurfing.com, 2017; emphasis in the original).

The quest for meaningful connections and authentic experiences stands out in portrayals of such practices. Circumventing the hospitality industry, couchsurfers – like most backpackers –

are global travellers who prefer being hosted by local people, free of charge, relying on their hosts to meet other locals and go beyond typical touristic attractions. In these emerging hospitality practices, the strangeness of the stranger is tackled online. Couchsurfers have profiles displaying their age, gender, hometown, and personal interests on websites such as Couchsurfing.com and Servas.org. In contacting each other in advance to ask for lodging, they negotiate risk and build trust online before meeting in person (Molz, 2011).

A striking feature of these hospitality practices is their foundational expectation of reciprocal exchanges of cultural backgrounds, prior knowledge, and experiences. This reciprocal system, as Chen (2011) remarks, draws primarily on the exchange of hospitality through the intercultural ties that couchsurfing produces. While hosts have access to a cosmopolitan lifestyle at home via their guests' cultural backgrounds, guests relish authentic local experiences of the places they visit (Molz, 2007; Chen, 2011), which produces a sense of belonging to a global community (Rosen, Lafontaine and Hendrickson, 2011) built upon reciprocal cosmopolitan exchanges. However, the distance often separating the homes of couchsurfers and their hosts' complicates the continuing interpersonal commitments that hospitality is deemed to establish.

The acute ethnographic accounts of Bialski (2012) and Chen (2011) illustrate a first form of reciprocity that global travellers deploy to express gratitude to their hosts. Since the latter are seen to propose 'authentic' ways of experiencing a travel destination, the most explicit way of giving in return is by bringing an 'authentic' souvenir to the hosts or cooking them a 'traditional' meal from the guests' home country. Other forms include spending more time with the host: 'as hosts, they felt their visitors were using them as a hotel if they didn't "stick around and chat" to them' (Bialski 2012: 53). These forms of thanking for the hospitality received, however, take place during the hospitable encounter itself, which makes the exchange explicit and short-lived.

A different way of reciprocating hospitality across long distances is outlined by Pitt-Rivers (1968): when invited by local upper-middle-class men to drink wine in Spain, Pitt-Rivers repeatedly offered to pay for the drinks, but his offers were systematically refused on the grounds of him being a guest. This refusal was followed by his hosts' explanation that he could not pay for drinks in Spain, but one day they could meet again in England, where he, for having become the host, would be expected to pay. If hospitality exchange is based on the alternation of roles between hosts and guests, then reciprocating should take the form of giving hospitality in turn.

These two forms of reciprocating hospitality illustrate how previous works convey reciprocity as taking the shape of an immediate repayment for a one-time transaction – or the expectation of such direct repayment. By contrast, taking the analogy between hospitality and gifting seriously would require us to conceive of reciprocity as something that makes the exchange – as well as the relationships deriving from it – persist beyond the framework of a single hospitable encounter. Against this backdrop, how can a global community arise if the bonds that bring international travellers together are so short-lived and hosts and guests tend never to meet again? In other words, what would Mauss have written about the gift, or Pitt-Rivers about hospitality, had they come across couchsurfers, backpackers... and Esperantists?

The same paradox of ephemeral relationships said to form a lasting community arises among Esperanto speakers – who, unsurprisingly, were among the pioneers of couchsurfing. In 1974, the hospitality platform *Pasporta Servo* was created, consisting of a printed catalogue containing the personal information and contact details of people willing to meet and host global travellers. *Pasporta Servo* means ‘Passport Service’ in Esperanto, the language in which the hospitable encounters arising from this platform are carried out. With its early catalogue being continuously updated and going online in 2008, *Pasporta Servo* preceded the currently well-known Couchsurfing.com, being among the first attempts to institutionalize hospitality exchange tourism. This manner of travelling is characterized by role alternation: those who were guests (or couchsurfers) on one occasion are registered on such platforms as potential hosts, and are expected to make themselves available to host other travellers, meet them for coffee, or guide them around.

The fact that *Pasporta Servo* is aimed at Esperanto speakers is not a minor detail. In addition to promoting more personal host-guest relationships, this platform also builds community: the Esperanto community, referred to by the language’s speakers as *Esperantujo* or *Esperantio*. Since Esperanto speakers are dispersed and this transnational speech community lacks the materiality of a territory of its own, initiatives such as *Pasporta Servo* – as well as visits by people like me to local Esperanto associations in France – enable speakers to meet each other in person and instantiate community.

With *Esperantujo*’s materializations dwelling primarily on hospitality practices, this ethnographic account invites us to welcome community-building into the anthropology of hospitality. This allows us to make sense of how hosting strangers-foreigners lie at the heart of the use of this language, and of how a joint consideration of giving, receiving, and reciprocating can enhance our understanding of transnational communities established through hospitality exchange.

Crossing the threshold

After accepting *Esperanto-France*’s invitation, I took a train in Paris and spent a full month speaking almost entirely in Esperanto and passing from one Esperantist household to another. On a cold morning in February 2017, the couple who had hosted me for two nights near Nantes woke me early to go for a walk around the Grand-Lieu Lake. Following brunch, they would drive me south to my next stop, La Roche-sur-Yon, the 54,000-inhabitant capital city of the *département de la Vendée*. After an hour on the road – during which my hosts exhaustively inquired my impressions about French landscapes and cuisine – we reached my next hosts, Martine and Daniel.¹ As we parked the car next to the train station, the couple (who had a photo of me) walked towards us. Daniel, in his late fifties and with a youthful attitude, greeted us in Esperanto, shook hands with me enthusiastically and, as if correcting a mistake, said: ‘no, come on, you’re Brazilian! Let’s hug!’ As my previous hosts left, the couple brought me to the *maison des associations*, where I had been invited to give a talk.

For half a day, a lively group of 25 Esperantists from across Vendée attended my talk and invited me to play board games. Meanwhile, they showed interested in hearing more about

anthropology and life in Latin America – interest which was interspersed with questions from two people particularly curious about my thoughts on how French people differ from Brazilians. Noticing my travel weariness, Martine and Daniel confirmed they would host me that evening, before I continued my tour the following day. They then drove me to their house, 45 kilometres away from La Roche.

Born in Alsace in the early 1960s, Daniel and Martine moved to the Atlantic Coast once their two daughters grew up and moved out. Having learned Esperanto in 2004 after coming across a rock singer who had an Esperanto song in her repertoire, they both have used this language in their free time to meet people, make friends, and travel abroad.

Daniel opened the door and, with a wide gesture pointing to the living room, welcomed me with a ‘bonvenon!’ The two-bedroom house was simple but spacious, and Daniel enthusiastically showed me around while carrying my rucksack to the second bedroom, built ‘to host Esperantists – and, secondarily, our daughters.’ Despite Vendée not being a popular travel destination in France, the couple occasionally hosted Esperantists who came to give talks at the local association. Inviting me into the kitchen while they finished preparing dinner, Daniel showed me a bottle, asking: ‘This is *Ricard pastis*, the most traditional French drink for an aperitif. Have you ever tasted it? I hope not, because I wanted to show you some things from our country!’

While he poured the *pastis* into our glasses, showing me how to mix it with water to give it a cloudy look, Martine and Daniel eagerly told me stories about their 2011 trip to São Paulo to attend the 46th Brazilian Congress of Esperanto. Instead of making concrete plans for the two weeks they intended to stay for in Brazil, the couple ended up meeting Esperantists at the congress who offered to host them throughout the country. Daniel then put down his glass and asked me to follow him. Around the house, he showed me photos, souvenirs, and pieces of decoration they had brought from Brazil, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Poland, places they visited after having learned Esperanto. Following a failed attempt at playing a Vietnamese bamboo flute from their collection, he said:

The greatest thing about attending local and national Esperanto meetings abroad is that we are often among the few foreigners there. The local Esperantists are curious, they come and talk to us, and we make friends easily. It gives us great opportunities to visit other places and make friends. That’s what we did. [...] For me, this is the only interesting way of travelling. Check this out!

Daniel then took me to the front of the house, where their car was parked. Mocking his talkativeness, Martine followed us and interrupted him: ‘I know, you’re gonna show him the bumper sticker, right?’ They both laughed, and he indeed showed me the white sticker on the black Citroën, with the image of two backpackers (a man and a woman), followed by the sentence (in Esperanto): ‘The crazy grandparents travel alternatively thanks to Esperanto.’ He commented:

I keep saying that we’re not tourists, we’re Esperantists. I don’t like to visit a place as a tourist, to just go sightseeing. I like to be hosted by local people, to learn about their

customs and their everyday life, and to visit the place itself. And Esperanto is what enabled and encouraged us to do so.

Rather annoyed by his endless talk, Martine invited us in and asked me: 'have you ever had a complete French meal? I'll show you how it is!' After the aperitif, six further courses awaited: starters, the main meal, salad, an assortment of cheese, dessert, and an espresso. During each course, the couple told me about the dish, interspersing their explanations about what they defined as 'French food' with questions about me and a pleasant conversation about their trips as Esperantists.

Appearing to be an instance of hospitality like any other, the visit of this foreign ethnographer provided them with a rare opportunity to revive their experiences in Esperantujo. Moreover, in speaking Esperanto, they also performed their nationalities, contrasting their Frenchness with the Brazilianness they had projected onto me since our welcome hug near the train station.

Practising the language, offering hospitality, building community

My *Tour de France* was not a one-off event, but something regularly organized by Espéranto-France to bring foreigners to invigorate Esperanto meetings across the country. Since Esperanto is a constructed language with no native speakers (Miner, 2011) and not customarily spoken anywhere, opportunities to speak it depend, among other things, on regular gatherings organized by associations and clubs – which, in France, bring together primarily local French people. In this sense, the visit of foreigners enables Esperantists to materialize Esperanto's internationalist purpose, as this language was designed in the late 19th century to promote more egalitarian cross-border exchanges (Schor, 2016).

Georges, responsible for organizing the Esperantist tours in France, routinely surveys local associations on who to invite. Each association welcomes around three international visitors per year, who give talks about their home country, occupation, or other topics of interest. These talks are in Esperanto, occasionally followed by an offhand interpretation into French.

Being used to hosting foreigners on tour, most associations have systematized hospitality arrangements. The weeks before the visitors' arrival are marked by teachers intensifying their regular, free-of-charge Esperanto classes. These aim to help beginners brush up their language skills – to avoid them babbling in French in case they lack Esperanto vocabulary when speaking to the foreign interlocutor. In addition, these international visits involve a polite competition among association members to decide who will host the visitor. Gender and family arrangements are taken into consideration: visitors are ideally hosted by Esperanto-speaking families, and female guests are more likely to be allocated to couples or single women than to single men. The chosen hosts are also presumed to have a spare room and to offer a guided tour, which place them as providers of food, shelter, and transportation, as well as the gatekeepers to the local community. Yet, the main criterion to qualify hosts, as Georges revealed, is fluency in Esperanto, to ensure guests will be duly understood and taken care of.

Etymologically speaking, the Latin origins of the word 'hospitality' convey guests and hosts as, respectively, 'foreigners' and 'guest-masters' (Benveniste 1969: 87-101), which highlights the

power that the owner of the house or community has over the guest. The French language, in turn, does not make room for such a neat distinction, with guests and hosts being designated by the same word, *hôte*.² Conversely, the difference between *gasto* and *gastiganto* is well marked in Esperanto. *Gasti*, ‘to sojourn,’ is intransitive and indicates an action that, to take place, only depends on one subject – *la gasto*, the guest. In turn, in the transitive verb *gastigi* (‘to give hospitality’ or ‘to host’), the suffix -ig- refers to the one who turns someone/something into something else. While Latin emphasizes the mastery of a space, Esperanto points to how the host (*gastiganto*) is entitled to ascribe the status of guest (*gasto*) onto someone else.

Invocations of the significance of hospitality and gift exchange for the enactment of the Esperanto community are not new, tracing back to the early days of the language. Since the launch of the first Esperanto book, in 1887, the initial contacts in the language were established through correspondence, whereby the early Esperantists continuously sent, received, and reciprocated each other’s letters and postcards (Forster, 1982). As the historian Ulrich Lins (2017) shows, receiving foreign Esperantists and their letters remained significant in the late 1970s, 90 years after the creation of Esperanto:

They [members of Esperanto associations in Eastern Europe] possessed a kind of exotic attraction, particularly evident in the GDR [German Democratic Republic], whose citizens, unlike, for example, Poles and Hungarians, were prevented from traveling. Instead, they wrote letters (one young woman acquired 100 contacts in 60 countries) or themselves hosted visitors from abroad. It caused something of a sensation to show a Japanese visitor the sights of Potsdam using Esperanto (2017: 129).

Also emphasizing the prominence of hospitality, the literature scholar Esther Schor (2016) introduces us to Kalindi, a 46-year-old Nepalese secretary, who attended a major international Esperanto congress in Rotterdam in 2008 and, later, spent one month travelling and being hosted across Europe by fellow Esperantists. Schor adds: ‘Kalindi hosts every Esperantist who passes through Kathmandu in her home, where one bedroom is designated *Esperanta Ĉambro* (Esperanto Room)’ (2016: 38-39). Schor’s methodological choices also reflect this need to travel to come in contact with Esperanto speakers, as each chapter of her book is an ethnographic reflection on one of her trips using Esperanto. Furthermore, international hospitality is among the key arguments for this language in the latest version of Espéranto-France’s advertising leaflet, which stresses, in French, the potential of using the language to access other cultures, more egalitarian intercultural exchanges and ‘des hébergements gratuits lors de vos voyages (92 pays)’ (free lodging in your trips, in 92 countries).

Hosting foreign Esperantists is particularly important to those who, for diverse reasons, do not travel abroad, and take these visits as unique opportunities to have meaningful encounters with foreigners ‘at home.’ The functioning of the abovementioned *Pasporta Servo* fits within this framework, which is also the case for the now-extinct *Amikeca Reto* (Friendship Network, 1987-2007). Amikeca Reto was popular mostly among working-class Esperantists, who offered free lodging to those who wanted to learn and share about their everyday lives, political perspectives and working conditions, but it ceased existing after being swallowed by Pasporta Servo’s success. Esperantist visits and tours also result in memorabilia – souvenirs given and

received, photos taken, and guest books signed – as well as news articles in local French-language newspapers and in the quarterly magazine *Le monde de l'Espéranto*.

Alongside institutionalized hospitality, the Esperanto-speaking community acquires temporary material existence through the congresses described by Daniel, which take place regularly since 1905. Esperantists frequently organize caravans and travel together to attend these gatherings, hosted each year by a different country. Hence, from letter exchange (and, more recently, online communication) to attending congresses and providing hospitality, Esperantujo is constituted on the move, through travelling, exchanging, visiting, and hosting.

Martine and Daniel, my hosts in Vendée, offer a solid illustration of the labour involved in continuously breathing life into this community. As self-employed printmakers, their working conditions provide them with the time and financial resources to travel. Despite speaking intermediate English and German – the languages they use at border controls, alongside French – they only travelled outside Europe after learning Esperanto. When deciding to do so, they circumvented commercial hospitality and travelled as Esperantists, not as tourists, as their car bumper sticker reads. Interestingly, in visiting Brazil or Vietnam, their destination choices were contingent not on touristic attractions or old friends they wanted to visit, but on unknown Esperantists they wanted to get to know.

The couple seems to do justice to the etymology of the word 'Esperantist' (*esperantisto*): -ist-conventionally refers to one's occupation or regular activity (such as *verkisto*, writer) or one's ideology (as in *komunisto*, communist). In his prescriptive grammar, Wennergren (2005: 575-576) remarks that this suffix cannot be used to designate speakers of a certain language: an English speaker is *anglo-parolanto*, not *anglisto*. Being an *esperantisto*, therefore, goes beyond being an *Esperanto-parolanto*: it also refers to being invested in certain activities that, either intentionally or inadvertently, continuously (re)produce materializations of Esperantujo.

Contrasting with how scholars studying couchsurfers tend to treat the emic concept of 'global community' as largely self-evident, it is worth unpacking how the Esperanto community effectively takes shape. Thinking of 'community' as a social configuration whose members have something in common, the most striking feature Esperantists share is the language. Such as in speech communities (Duranti, 1997), members of Esperantujo share certain linguistic norms and resources that enable them to communicate among themselves in spoken and written forms, recognize one's level of fluency, refer to comparable sets of books and media, and tentatively guess one's mother tongue based on one's way of speaking Esperanto. Yet, for not being geographically bounded, the Esperanto community has a transient character (Mortensen 2017) and feeble materiality (Fians 2019). Bringing it into being involves 'work on some form of shared activity which will often be the reason why the social configuration was formed in the first place (Mortensen 2017: 274).

Such labour involved in building community, then, gains currency: couchsurfers and backpackers instantiate global communities analogous to communities of practice (Wenger 1998; Eckert 2006) through meeting and giving hospitality to strangers who partake of the same globetrotting interests. Similarly, Esperantujo relies on episodes of international travelling and hospitality to overcome Esperantists' geographical dispersion and materialize this community's internationality. One could couchsurf without speaking Esperanto as much as

meet foreigners by making friends with migrants, refugees or tourists in one's hometown. However, Esperanto-mediated hospitality entails not only speaking the language, meeting foreigners, hosting, being hosted, and sharing interests in socially enriching transnational encounters. It involves mainly generating a sense of connection with unknown fellow Esperantists widely distributed across the globe – a feeling of belonging that is revived whenever Esperantists from different backgrounds meet and recall their experiences and expectations as fellow members of this community.

Due to the distances separating Esperantists, they frequently spend little time with the same guest or host, in relationships that may endure beyond a hospitable gesture, but that seldom proceed through a counter-gesture of hospitality. Yet, in speaking the language and offering hospitality to fellow Esperantists, they share the commitment to their unknown fellows and the expectation that other Esperantists across the world will do the same, such that instances of hospitality will continuously instantiate this community and create occasions for the language to be spoken.

Nevertheless, once fluency in this language reveals to be the utmost requirement for a stranger-foreigner to be welcomed as a guest within this community, what is the bond to be established between hosts and guests and what does that imply about the host community?

Standing for one's community, or making sense of uncanny shifts of scale

Like Boas (1887), Lévi-Strauss (1949) and Pitt-Rivers (1968), every ethnographer mapping out hospitality practices has something to say about mechanisms of incorporation of guests. This is certainly true here: assessing the strangers' Esperanto language proficiency constitutes the decisive test for determining whether they will be taken as guests. Accordingly, not being able to express oneself in the language would raise questions about one's belonging to Esperantujo. By the same token, local Esperantists who are not proficient are less likely to volunteer to host fellow speakers. Reaching back to the etymology of *gastiganto*, not mastering the spoken language prevents one from ascribing the status of guest on another Esperantist, since the impossibility to develop meaningful connections through communication would presumably hinder the enjoyment that hospitality could provide to both parties.

Language skills, in this case, soften the strangeness of the stranger, qualifying the visitor as someone potentially entertaining and as a fellow community member to be trusted. Yet, while hospitality and hostility refer to opposite ways of asserting a relationship, the effective reverse of hospitality, rather than enmity, is indifference (Selwyn 2000). This places French people outside the hospitality-hostility framework for French Esperantists: being Brazilian is what entitled me to be invited for this trip around France, based on the stereotypical expectation that contacts with foreigners, from different national backgrounds, could be more socially enriching for the hosts. Additionally, my coming from a different language background enabled Esperanto to stand out as the tie binding the foreigner and the locals.

This instance of xenophilia, expressed through a preference for fellow speakers who are national others, is key to Esperantujo as a transnational speech community, finding parallels

with what Chen (2011: 290) identifies as an 'eagerness to meet foreigners' among couchsurfers in Taiwan. Chen's ethnography thoroughly illustrates that couchsurfers' labour to create a global community involves seeking out opportunities to speak English when relating to foreign visitors. Without foreignness, global communities remain local.

Along these lines, Esperanto was designed to encourage people to overcome national borders and language barriers. However, for this transnational speech community to exist, also borders, language barriers, and national difference must exist, so that Esperantists can cross and overcome these with the help of the language. In addition to Esperanto, this community is equally grounded in its members' backgrounds and particularities, which must be constantly performed as indexes of national diversity (see Harrison, 2003). Hence, hosting a foreign Esperantist evokes a monumental scale shift: two French nationals and Vendée residents welcoming a Brazilian national originally from Rio de Janeiro; from individuals to representatives of entire collectivities. As a guest, I was a stranger crossing a house's threshold as much as a foreigner crossing a national border, with 'welcome' acquiring various meanings at diverse levels and scales (Herzfeld, 1987).

It may be rather simplistic, though, to think of scale shifts from houses to nation-states as abstractions or metaphors. Addressing this concern, Candea (2012) calls for an empirical outlook towards these scales on the ground. Paying particular attention to actual relationships, tensions, and the materiality that enable hospitality to take place, the Esperanto association and Martine and Daniel's house establish the thresholds that the guest crosses; the welcome hug they gave me lays down their stereotypical expectations about Brazilians' tropical warmth; the *Ricard pastis* enacts their Frenchness to be contrasted with my Brazilianness. The same applies to the numerous questions asked by my Nantes' hosts and the Vendée association's members about my Brazilian comparative viewpoints on life at home and abroad. Not unproblematically, the visitor is not necessarily perceived as an individual, but is reified as a stranger of a certain type (Simmel, 1971), as a representative and sample of a typological/national variety (Malkki, 1994).

As the Vendée couple concretely enacted their self-ascribed Frenchness, the non-metaphorical character of this enlargement of circles progressively gained materiality. Through the act of hospitality, attributes such as social class, religion, and gender are underplayed, and nationality becomes one's feature to be made salient – initially through stereotypical expectations and, after a talk and a meal, through an overcoming of stereotypes and a deeper knowledge of each other's backgrounds and personalities. Meanwhile, the differences that set local hosts and foreign guests apart as strangers coming from different national (imagined) communities (Anderson, 1983) are partially overshadowed by their common belonging to the transnational (Esperanto-speaking) community.

While in a hierarchically superior position due to being at home (in their house and country), the French hosts are on a more levelled playing field in relation to the guest when they join Esperantujo – where both host and guest enjoy the same rights. Calling into question the territorial ethics of hospitality (Battaglia, 2012), Esperantujo is not located in Brazil or France, and neither of the parties involved is sovereign in its territory: it is found in the very hospitable encounter that enables the use of the language. In speaking Esperanto, the hierarchy between

host and guest is softened, as the former (the local citizen) and the latter (the foreigner, the citizen of elsewhere) are revealed to be fellow citizens/members of the Esperanto community.

The obligation to reciprocate, generalized

Reaching back to the emic connection between travelling and being a member of the Esperanto community, the unfoldings of host-guest relationships such as the one above materialize the performance of hosts' and guests' nationalities, constituting hospitable encounters as prime settings where these actors can make authentic use of Esperanto to overcome language barriers and national stereotypes. In this vein, the direct reciprocal relationship established between my hosts and I hinged on a short-lived, yet meaningful Esperanto-mediated cosmopolitan exchange: while the couple offered me a meal, a place to stay, and an experience deemed authentically French, in return I offered them a talk at the association, a pleasant conversation in Esperanto, and an occasion for them to recall their meaningful experiences in Brazil and Esperantujo. After that visit, the couple and I never met again and hardly remained in touch, aside from exchanging a handful of messages on Facebook – just as Martine and Daniel's previous hosts in Brazil and Vietnam did.

Such a focus on giving and receiving conveys the hospitable encounter as a one-time event. Yet, this does not account for the reasons why Esperanto-France and several Paris-based Esperantists insisted that my research should be carried out on the move.

While spending most of our evening setting up relatable topics of conversation, Martine and Daniel were instantiating Esperantujo: sharing their travel stories as Esperantists emerged as a way to confirm the material existence of this community – an ephemeral one – substantiated through hospitality. Excited and thankful as they were for their experiences as Esperantist guests abroad, they were this time replicating those experiences at home – therefore, reciprocating – by hosting me. In this way, the moral obligation to reciprocate that underpins Esperantujo is fulfilled through inviting others to give a talk at their association and offering hospitality to them, like this ethnographer – as long as those involved speak the language. Challenging the way the hospitality-gifting theoretical paradigm is built on moral, internalized obligations that prompt enduring exchanges and, over time, turn strangers into friends, the case of Esperantist hospitality – similarly to couchsurfing and other instances of hospitality exchange tourism – places hosting and being hosted as obligations to be indirectly, rather than directly, reciprocated. Hence, counter-gestures of hospitality, as well as travel invitations, are not expected to be necessarily oriented towards one's original host, but towards an unidentified fellow community member.

In this way, reciprocity shifts from a direct obligation into an indirect, generalized expectation: I may neither talk to them again nor host them in my home in the future as the friendships arising from such practices tend to be brief, intense, exciting, but lacking in longevity (Bialski, 2012: 86-87). Nonetheless, as a fellow community member, I am expected to open my doors to Esperantists who contact me asking for hospitality and, perhaps, invite some of them to visit me. Certainly not every Esperanto speaker has the money, time, or interest in travelling and seeking hospitable encounters that would eventually develop into a sense of commitment

towards Esperantujo – after all, not every Esperanto speaker is an Esperantist. Nevertheless, Martine, Daniel, and those who host Esperantists in France and elsewhere do so, and the shared assumption that this is a common Esperantist practice creates this transnational speech community through implicit, generalized reciprocity.

In explaining generalized reciprocity, Sahlins (1972) indicates that the ways of reciprocity may not always be straightforward. As he argues, when one gives something to a family member or close friend, the persistent relationship between both parties exempts the gift/hospitality giver to expect return and frees the receiver from the obligation to reciprocate directly. However, in the case of larger, transnational communities, the latter's very magnitude and dispersion further challenge the links between reciprocity and enduring dyadic commitments. Because the obligation to reciprocate hospitality is indirect and generalized, reciprocity is less likely to foster one-to-one durable interpersonal commitments, and its realization is untraceable, relying on no formal mechanism of reinforcement. Nevertheless, expanding the concept of generalized reciprocity enables us to grasp the continuous commitments that build community as a by-product of reciprocity. The dynamics that create and sustain community through such expectations, ultimately, distinguish people from whom one expects reciprocation from those from whom one does not, thus discerning the community's insiders and outsiders.

Relationships formed, forms of relationships

Exchanges of gifts draw the attention of anthropologists because of their effectiveness in making relationships. Interestingly, this making varies widely and can take various forms: gift exchanges can establish relationships through open giving, receiving and being susceptible to reciprocation (Mauss, 1990); deny the establishment of relationships through avoiding reciprocity and downplaying the role of the giver (Laidlaw, 2000); or even break, reconfigure and recalibrate relationships (Wilson, 2018). By tracing how hospitality helps build community, I propose that our understanding of reciprocity can be enhanced by placing it in dialogue with wider exchange practices.

In 1923, Mauss (1990) posed a good question, on why people feel obligated to reciprocate what they have received. Forty-five years later, Pitt-Rivers (1968) inquired about how to relate to strangers and manage reciprocal exchanges with those with whom one is not familiar. Had they known couchsurfers, backpackers, and Esperantists, perhaps their inquiry would go along the lines of: what happens when people feel obligated to reciprocate what they have received, but the original giver is no longer within reach?

Given the distance that prevents hosts and international guests from committing to meet again, part of the debt that hospitality engenders seems to be paid directly: a shelter in exchange for an opportunity to meet someone new, a meal for a pleasant conversation. As hospitality is repaid but not directly reciprocated, the remaining debt is expressed as a commitment to the community which these individual hosts and guests epitomize. While Martine and Daniel placed themselves as French representatives hosting a sample of Brazilianness, the three of us were also standing for Esperantujo, thus highlighting our salient sameness, whereby the hospitality directed towards me was the continuation of an exchange

previously initiated with other community members. This sets up a generalized obligation to reciprocate, rooted in the prosaic expectation that I will eventually express my gratitude and give in turn through offering my presence, shelter, and meals to other Esperantists.

The fact that members are regarded as representing their community brings about further implications. Ultimately, the 'stranger' in such acts of hospitality turns out to be a fellow, whose partial familiarity facilitates the recognition of a generalized commitment and the building of mutual trust. Thus, it is not about welcoming any foreigner, but welcoming fellow Esperantists from abroad, through encounters that maintain the national features attributed to hospitality givers and receivers while softening one's foreignness with their shared community membership. These fellow community members, in turn, share not only the same language and interests in being part of a cosmopolitan, interconnected world, but also a sense of solidarity and commitment to (still) unknown fellow Esperantists – who they come to know through giving, receiving, and reciprocating hospitality.

Coda

Taking hospitality practices among Esperantists as its starting point, this examination of meanings and forms of reciprocity among global travellers has revealed how generalized reciprocity works to breathe life again and again into transnational communities. As noted above, several authors (Chen, 2011; Rosen, Lafontaine and Hendrickson, 2011; Bialski, 2012) recognize reciprocity in the guests' attempts to cook traditional dishes and chat with their hosts. Expanding these analytical perspectives, this article has shown that friendly cosmopolitan dispositions and displays of gratitude are ways of repaying hospitality in a non-monetary fashion, but do not exempt the original guests from partaking in the turn-taking whereby they are expected to become someone else's host.

Just as initiating a gift exchange is prone to be a voluntary act, no one is obligated to learn Esperanto and perform this labour of travelling, hosting, and being hosted. However, in choosing to join such chains of exchanges through reciprocating hospitality and animating a transnational community, couchsurfers, backpackers, and Esperantists are not primarily concerned with making lasting friendships. Instead, their commitment is with wider practices: of couchsurfing as a cultural exchange that produces authentic experiences, or of speaking Esperanto as a way of overcoming language barriers and national stereotypes. Interestingly, the resulting forms of relationships at play lead us to the paradoxical finding that such acts of hospitality make relationships that are short-lived in their own right, but contribute to the establishment of communities that are long-lasting. In this vein, exploring the centrality of reciprocity in hospitality practices calls into question the very form and meaning of obligation and commitment, switching their focus from individuals to collective entities.

While this perspective tackles the dilemma raised by Pitt-Rivers – who perhaps never reciprocated directly the wine his Spanish friends paid for – such an approach partially clashes with Mauss': if the original receiver does not reciprocate the gift to the original giver, then the relationship to be made is denied, the debt incurred is not paid, and the spirit of the gift may loom over the receiver. However, daring to tentatively expand the significance of this

discussion on generalized reciprocity, would the Maussian paradigm explain gift exchanges in contexts such as 'secret Santa?' In this exchange, the receiver of a gift gives a gift to someone who is not the original giver. All those involved in the 'secret Santa' exchange would assume that the other participants will give a gift, but not necessarily to the same person. The fact that the original giver is unlikely to receive a gift from the original receiver is not a flaw of this exchange, but rather, essential to its functioning.

Thinking about wider exchange practices beyond the framework of hospitality, generalized reciprocity seems to be pervasive in community-building across long distances. Is not hitchhiking founded upon an equivalent principle, of one taking rides, expecting someone else to give rides to fellow travellers and, eventually, giving rides to other hitchhikers? The same could be said about online communities such as support groups, which are based on the generalized expectation to reciprocate that moves members to share personal experiences, offer advice and, ultimately, instantiate what sociologists call 'solidarity' (Molm, Collett and Schaefer, 2007). Lastly, academics could also be said to be involved in forms of generalized reciprocity: do not anonymous peers voluntarily review journal articles with the expectation that other scholars will act (or will have acted) as their articles' reviewers at a given time? Ultimately, in the latter case, engaging in these uncertain feedback exchanges helps instantiate, through publishing, academia as a community.

Regardless of the answers to these open-ended questions, after staying one night in Vendée, my next stop would be the département de la Charente-Maritime. The ceremonial exchange would soon begin again: driving me to La Rochelle, Martine and Daniel would ritually pass me on to the Esperantists who would host me the following night, providing continuity to the reciprocity that moves this gift and hospitality exchange.

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Notes

1. To ensure anonymity, all my interlocutors' names are pseudonyms, which are based on popular names according to their nationality and age range.

2. Derrida (2000), in a talk originally in French, addresses this lack of linguistic clarity through coining the notion of *hostipitality*, which reaches back to host-pet, the Latin trope that marks the power relations constitutive of hospitality practices.

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