

Bringing it Back Home: Producing Neoliberal Subjectivities

Kathryn Sorrells

What happens when the hegemony of neoliberalism penetrates and permeates the home? Where do we reside when the spaces of home are the parameters and disciplinary apparatus through which neoliberal subjects are articulated? Theorizing about the neoliberal subject has focused primarily on the privatization of public spaces, the production of subjectivities as bodies are regulated and policed in public and the re-constitution of citizens as consumers. Yet, *Home: Hospitality, Belonging and the Nation* performed by Karma R. Chávez (Roxanne), Sara L. McKinnon (Charlene), Lucas C. Messer (Jaime), Desireé Rowe (Marla), Scott Boras (Bob) and Marjorie Hazeltine (Jill) examines the subtle and intimate ways in which neoliberal subjectivities are produced and performed in the privacy of our most intimate sites of belonging. As “home” is reconfigured as a site of surveillance, discipline and forced consent, belonging in the home, as in the nation, comes under scrutiny.

As audience “guests” enter the performance space, Jill, the powerful suburban matriarch, takes charge of the dinner party preparations organizing and re-organizing the physical space and punctuating her movements with a nagging litany to budge Bob, the stereotypical U.S. American couch potato father, from his place in front of the TV. Meanwhile, their off-at-college son, Jaime, arrives home along with his friend, Natalie. Jaime is enlisted as his mother’s assistant in policing the space—to “make sure everything is in its place” (Chávez et al. 1). Shortly, Marla arrives and her role as “helper” (she is not a MAID) is signified as the apron is removed from Jill’s waist and wrapped around Marla’s. Charlene, Jill and Bob’s friend, arrives and with the entrance of Roxanne, revealed later as Charlene’s partner, the full complement of dinner guests is present. Through introductory chit chat with Jaime, we learn that he and Natalie are big into justice studies at school. A slight tension, monitored and silenced by Jill, arises between father and son regarding the relevance and job prospects for justice studies majors.

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The stage is set for a potentially rich juxtaposition of multiple and contested geopolitical and interpersonal issues in the performance of *Home*. Ideological tensions between liberal and conservative views, hegemonic and resistive positions, and colonial and postcolonial interpretations spar, each scoring points of recognition, as conversations brush up against critical issues of immigration, inclusion/exclusion and perceived security threats. These contestations culled from contemporary life are set along side interpersonal tensions of connection and disaffection, belonging and alienation and boundaries of home and “foreign” territory. The issues are compelling. Opportunities to locate the complexities and contradictions of embodied experience in the context of neoliberal globalization await in this performance.

In *Home: Hospitality, Belonging and Nation*, entitlements are captured highlighting, on the one hand, deeply embedded privileges while simultaneously revealing the production of neoliberal subjectivities. Neoliberalism, a political movement coalescing in the last twenty-five years to recapture economic dominance by global elites, advocates economic liberalism or “free” market capitalism (Smith and Guarnizo). The term “neoliberalism” is rarely used in the United States; yet, its effects are evident in the widening gap between rich and poor. While unnamed in the U.S.A., neoliberal policies, modes of regulation and disciplinary strategies circulate as postmodern and postcolonial truths producing subjectivities contoured by ideologies of freedom of choice, individual initiative and responsibility, the privatization of public good and citizens as consumers. David Harvey argues that neoliberalism “... has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has persuasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (3).

Our entitlements are captured. Like old family photos or home videos, the performance of *Home: Hospitality, Belonging and Nation*, captures, in a descriptive way, our entitlements. Children come and go to university. Guests travel to and from homes. Someone goes to well-paid work—signs of U.S. American class privilege are everywhere: a house, for one; a big screen TV; multiple cars and trips to Europe. Claims to mobility, leisure, ownership, study, travel, art, places and history abound. Yet, our liberties—freedom of movement, choice, individualism and even or especially, dissent—within the home, in conversations, relationships, and in “public” spaces—are captured in another way, too. Policed, sanitized, and secured, the capture and containment of spaces, dialogues and relationships is normalized producing neoliberal subjectivities in the performance of everyday life.

Jill, ostensibly inviting and hospitable, regulates every inch of her “home” obsessed with keeping the space clean and organized and the conversations polite. The disciplinary strategies performed in *Home* mimic and reproduce the regulatory practices enacted as “public” spaces and resources are privatized and corporatized today through the project of neoliberalism. Explicit rules regulate permissible language and actions. Surveillance techniques police and curtail non-normative behaviors. The interests that are served are masked. In *Home*, the performance of (upper) middle-class, whiteness is everywhere; yet, all attempts to mark it are rubbed

down, “waxed” and erased. As the “guests” take their places at dinner, Jaime’s voice of social conscience questions how long and for what purpose the family has had a maid. How much do we pay her? What does she do? Jill, ever quick to patrol language and space, makes it clear that Marla is not a maid. Rather, she comes in, when needed to help out. The slippage from permanent to casual part-time labor is offered up as just another course in the neoliberal meal. As if on Jill’s commanding cue, Marla enters the dining space to serve. Ironically and revealingly, the conversation continues about her as if she were not there. Marla and her labor, like the millions who perform “flexible” jobs, are the “invisible hands” of the neoliberal market.

Jill works hard, too. The work of masking, sanitizing and normalizing inequitable social relations is demanding. While Jill labors to preserve the normalcy of home, the “strangeness” of Marla’s presence alienates Jaime from “home.” Bringing social injustice back home is uncomfortable—for some. Yet, this senseless discomfort over something that is perfectly natural must be neutralized and the benefits to a few recast as normal and desirable. Roxanne teases Jill about the presence of Marla, who, of course is not a maid—“No kidding, when did we get so fancy?” (Chávez et al. 5). As power is siphoned from labor to capital in the neoliberal context, the disciplining and re-regulation of social relations produces neoliberal subjects. Surely, Jill, Marla, Jaime and Roxanne are all free agents able to make choices, take individual initiative and responsibility.

Our entitlement to mobility is captured. Bodies entitled to move are defined by bodies that can not—those who are marked and detained. The freedom of back-from-college-Jaime, going-to-study-protest-theater-in-Europe-Natalie and tourists-in-France-Charlene-and-Roxanne is thrown into relief by a conversation about the plight of “the undocumented kid from ASU who was pulled over” (Chávez et al. 7). Some bodies—unmarked and unrestricted bodies—are free to move; others are not. Roxanne goading her partner Charlene as they physically move away from the disciplined space of “polite” dinner conversation asks “...what do you think they are going to do with that kid?” Charlene declares “They’ll probably deport him and they probably should. I mean, I am sure he is a perfectly nice guy, and I am also sure he is a good student, but you know, you can’t cross an international border without permission and just decide to make a life for yourself, you know” (Chávez et al. 8). The marginal body is the one who is marked, called forth and used to define the standard, the nature, the entitled. The bodies that do not fit the norm, ironically, the “undocumented” bodies—the seen and surveiled bodies—are the ones through which normative neoliberal bodies take shape (Sassen). In *Home*, the contours of normalized bodies at the dinner party are uneasily revealed through these side-line conversations. That normative bodies are produced through the abjection of others is a well-kept secret which those at the dinner party, to varying degrees, are invested in keeping.

Roxanne retorts: “What do you mean you can’t? It’s not as if that border has always been there or been policed in the way it is now. Plus, it’s our ridiculous economic policies that are forcing people north. And if these people weren’t brown—

.” To which Charlene quips: “...it’s not a race thing...” (Chávez et al. 8). Here and there in the dialogue, liberal and conservative political views banter back and forth, exposing the shifting historical legitimacy of borders, the racialization of border policing, root economic causes of current waves of migration and the colonial legacy of neoliberal globalization. Hegemonic colonial assumptions of entitlement to place, ownership and cultural superiority are insightfully called out. Yet, while sharpened and critical social consciousness makes a bid in the performance, it, too, is subject to neoliberal modes of regulation. It seems Roxanne’s political and social consciousness is a choice, casual and disposable—like any other consumer good. As tourists in southern France, the only import of the train workers strike for Roxanne and Charlene is the personal consequence of having to rent a car and drive in rush hour traffic in Nice! Roxanne “celebrates” the diversity of multiple immigrant groups in Marseille—Italians, Corsicans, Tunisians, Moroccans, Algerians, and Armenians—placed there, apparently, for the tourists’ benefit and intercultural pleasure, while Charlene, predictably, conflates all immigrants with illegality and criminality. Both people and positions—liberal and conservative, resistive and hegemonic, postcolonial and colonial, while seemingly in oppositional tension, participate in processes that divert attention from interrogations of structural inequities and exploitative social relations by reveling in individual choice, personal circumstances and private consumer goals.

“Yea, and frankly, it makes it feel not very French. It was kinda like when you go down to Guadalupe in Tempe. You know, that feeling that the space just isn’t very American. This space just isn’t very French,” laments Charlene (Chávez et al. 14). While entitled to consume the “other” in the markets, parks, history and through distinctive (and non- threatening) “cultural” practices such as the old men playing games of *les boules*, Charlene prefers it “when tourists can have their own areas and they don’t have to be confronted with the underbelly of a city—” (Chávez et al. 13). The neoliberal desire (of course, rooted in a long tradition of colonialism) for segregated, secured, cleansed and surveiled spaces that serve transnational tourist capital is consummated. As Jaime argues for the legitimacy of Algerian French citizenship and the conditions that may lead to undocumented migration, Jill, offering coffee, steps in to regulate and diffuse the escalating and likely messy tension, reaffirming her power to patrol, control and kill dissent.

In *Home*, entitlement to mobility, freedom, individualism, consumerism and social consciousness—at least, for some—is flaunted; yet, these entitlements—the freedom to move across international borders, consume the cultural practices and artifacts of the other and perform social consciousness at will and when convenient—are also and already captured. Policed, sanitized, and secured, the capture of public and private spaces, dialogues, and relationships realizes the neoliberal subject. The marked exclusion of some from these entitlements and privileges, the internalization of regulatory practices and their rationalization serve to define and normalize neoliberal subjectivity.

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In November 2006, Nobel Prize winning novelist Toni Morrison chose the theme of “A Foreigner’s Home” as the guest curator for a multidisciplinary, international conversation among artists and audiences at the Louvre in Paris. Films, readings, concerts and performances addressed the pains and rewards of migration, displacement, and exile experienced by millions who search for home, “like nomads between despair and hope, breath and death” as Morrison eloquently states. Writing about Morrison’s production of “A Foreigner’s Home,” New York Times journalist Alan Riding remarks: “... the body—enslaved, estranged, displaced, liberated—is effectively the storyteller.” On the other side of a foreigner’s home, what stories do the bodies in *Home: Hospitality, Belonging and Nation* tell? Home, so often imagined as a place of belonging, connection, alliance and affiliation, is instead presented as a sanitized, policed and dispassionate space where relational motivation is ambivalent, interpersonal ties are tenuous and neoliberal ideologies are embodied. The performance thus scrambles the relationship between the familiar and the foreign, the rational and the hysterical, as the sanitized space of home is re-constituted as a site of politely violent interpellation, discipline and control. It is not, as in Morrison’s text, that the other speaks, but that otherness is spoken and unspoken through stunted efforts at intervention that mark the limits of the politics of national belonging.

I wonder what could possibly motivate the friendship and affiliation between Roxanne and Jill. What connects them? What is the back-story—the necessarily unspoken and yet, in this case, unfelt and undeveloped relational plot—that brings them into each other’s homes? I can only speculate how two people, like Roxanne and Charlene, with such diametrically opposed political views, join as partners. What is their “home” territory of belonging? How do they navigate the fields of affection, intimacy and love? From beginning to end, Jaime experiences the displacement and alienation of home. How can this be home when outsiders—Marla, the maid and his parents’ bigoted friend—are here? When every question and resistive move is policed and curtailed, how can this be home? I certainly commend the ways in which the performance disrupts simplistic and often unlikely narratives of home as a cozy, harmonious and “feel-good” space; yet, the unexplored motivations for and investments in the relationships in *Home* detract from the plausibility and the objectives of the performance. While the continual regulating, sanitizing and policing of spaces, conversations and contestations makes a compelling reiterative performance of neoliberal subjectivity (Butler), the absence of a narrative line with momentum to carry the performance from conflict to climax towards some resolution works to flatten the affect of the performance. Given the highly complex and gripping content addressed in the performance, experimenting with the narrative form—while bold—may leave the audience still waiting.

Conceptually, the performance sets up a potentially dramatic context for dealing with the complexities of alliances and challenges pat formulas of who is partnered with whom and who sustains relationships across particular interpersonal boundaries. Mixing up assumed alliance spaces is a fascinating and forceful disruption; yet, this move requires even greater attention to character development for the audience to

grasp the impetus for these relationships and alliances. And then, other potentially compelling alliances remain dormant. Throughout the performance, I imagine a possible alliance forming between Roxanne and Jaime with the very likely collaboration of Natalie—an alliance based on critical consciousness, dissent and solidarity for justice. Yet, the alliance never materializes. While each, at various moments, independently voices their social conscience, they appear to operate in a vacuum isolated one from the others. While, this, of course, is “real” in the sense that those we hope for and expect as our allies often refuse their roles, I wonder about the latent possibilities awaiting in the performance if a sustained critique of hegemonic neoliberal, colonial views were advanced. Chandra Mohanty suggests that the question of defining and understanding home is a deeply political one. “...home, community and identity all fall somewhere between the histories and experiences we inherit and the political choices we make through alliances, solidarities, and friendships” (499). I can only imagine the possibilities—resistive and complicit, counterhegemonic and normative—if friendships and alliances in this performance were allowed to conceive, struggle with and perform “home” as a political space. Opportunities to locate the political space of home in the messy, contested trajectories of interpersonal relationships and the embodied experiences of unlikely alliances await in the performance of *Home: Hospitality, Belonging and Nation*. Or perhaps, those opportunities, too, are captured, constrained and contained through the de-politicization of the neoliberal subject.

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