

‘Oh, let’s not.’ Hospitable Silences: *Home: Hospitality, Belonging, and the Nation*

Jeanine Marie Minge

Intrusions

Recently a professor in my department was threatened by one of his students. The intrusion happened in his classroom. Immediately, students felt the onslaught of tension and turmoil. The perpetrator stood up in the middle of a lecture, pointed his finger, and searched accusingly around the room for the victims of his verbal anger. He bolstered questions such as, “Who in this room is gay? Who else is a Homo?” After a moment of shocked silence and avoiding eyes, he then approached female students in the room, made advances, and even tried to touch one on the leg. After this outburst and a reprimand from the professor, he sat back down. Then again, this student stood up and demanded, “I need a tutor. Do you think there are any women in this room that want to come home and give me private tutoring?” After that class, whispers of the student having a gun filled the hallways.

I wasn’t there. It wasn’t my class. The prior quotations are paraphrased statements, heresy accounts. I didn’t see the rumored gun. I do not know if he showed students the gun, but some say he did. Others say it wasn’t a gun at all. I do not know all of the details. Perhaps, it is not my story to tell.

Yet, what I do know is, after the incident, I felt the panic around the building. When I entered my classroom a few hours later to teach my course, *Communication and the Sexes*, the fear was palpable.

My students look up at me. They stop their chattering and wait, eyes wide, to hear what I have to say about what occurred only a few hours ago in this very room. This is a teachable moment. I want to explore the intersections of violence and material

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acts that reiterate homophobia and misogyny in our classroom, our temporary home.¹ I also want to be the voice of reason, a calming presence for them. I breathe in and as I exhale, I smile.

“Is everyone ok?” I ask. They nod.

I nod back to my students. I search the room for any sign from them. Should I open the space for a conversation about the incident? Should I ask them to talk about their emotions, experiences, fears, and need to feel safe? A student looks at me with pen ready in her hand. Another stares at the floor. Another student pleads with her eyes, waiting, waiting.

I didn’t directly address the incident. Nor did I repeat or relay any information about it. The facts weren’t straight yet. It was suggested to me by an authority figure that I calm the situation. And to be quite honest, I was scared. As the facilitator of the classroom, I didn’t want to disrupt or perpetuate their fears any further. I didn’t want to run the rumor mill, continue the violence, so I stayed silent. And in my hospitable silence, I subtly forced them to remain voiceless and to sit in that classroom imagining what might happen if that disruptive student barged in the door and opened his backpack.

Shhhh. It’s better this way. Don’t scare them.

I begin the lecture with the Expo pen in my hand and it hits me. I flash back to witnessing the performance, *Home: Hospitality, Belonging, and the Nation*. I can see the mother of the family, Jill. I am drawn to her because her performance of this character irks me. I want to wrinkle her neatly ironed white apron. I see her hands fold in front of her in a proper display of etiquette. I hear her loud,

hsssss, shhhhhhhhh.

Please, don’t talk about this now.

It will only reflect poorly on you, dear.

It just isn’t polite conversation.

¹ As I explore later in this review, the classroom can be understood as a home space, not a home in the Utopic sense of a safe space but a space of commune, a geographical space that intersects varying subject positions. I liken the classroom space to a home, in that for a certain period of time, we construct a temporary commune. A space to commune is most often times filled with difficult negotiations, sometimes violence, sometimes pain. But it is a space of commune, when we begin to intersect, conflict, communicate, and negotiate identities—if this negotiation is allowed, given the space to speak, and not closed by the performative, hospitable shhhh.

I move the marker against the white board. We need silence now. Right? To keep the peace? To balance the chaos?

In this moment, I'm drawn to John Cage's theories of silence—we need to reframe silence to hear.² Cage argues that there really is no silence just the moment we stop producing sounds. Cage's theory of silence changes the process of encountering music. It implicates the listener. It de-structures the structure of musical form. It denaturalizes the naturally expressive musical form, fostering awareness that music is a process that had been naturalized.³ If one listens to the moment we stop producing sounds, it points to the form, the structure, the limits of the institutions in which we exist, create, make, and perform. Perhaps Cage's perspective on sound as preemptive to silence, begets a focus on imposed silence within sound, the moment we stop producing sounds—the forceful nature of hospitable silence within public and private spaces.

I want to talk about silence, polite silence, hospitable silence—used as a conscious or unconscious decision to mask, hide, distract, and forget about the difficult moments, the rough friction of intersecting differences that move together within a home.

In order to make sense of the complicated negotiation of alienation and belonging, privilege and lack, home and hospitality, I work through hospitable silence within the performed home focusing on the character Jill, the mother, the shusher, the sound stopper. Next, I delineate how hospitable silence both secures and perpetuates a false sense of security, as it secures borders and territories. Finally, I propose a working definition of commune to unpack the dynamics of this performed family, the performed home, and secured public home. And in this making sense of the complex negotiations lost within the hospitable silences, we may be able to open spaces in which to commune, to create dialogic performance⁴ in our everyday lives.

Hospitable Silence.

hospitable silence
keeps the peace. calms the water.
(or does the breath of the shhh ripple the water)
normalizes. reinforces social norms. ignores.
bites. slaps your lips. tells you to shhhh.

² John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

³ Cage.

⁴ In "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," Dwight Conquergood states, "Dialogical performance is a way of having intimate conversation with other people and cultures. Instead of speaking about them, one speaks to and with them" (10).

then, it thanks you for being so gracious.

When I sit and try to imagine, embody, recreate hospitable silence, I feel Jill's awkward pauses, timed interaction, and pulses. She timed the interruptive nature of silence in an interesting rhythm. I feel frustration. I hear a spotty conversation that dips, in and out, of varying political, social, and personal topics. I hear pain. I feel a desire for more, a want, a need, a personal and collective desire to belong within the home, perhaps any home, where we can go to the depths of dialogic performance,⁵ allow for the honest and difficult exploration of varying subject positions.

Sbbbh. We aren't supposed to talk about these things.

What motivates hospitable silences?

Fear. (unconscious) people don't want anyone to seem out of order, abnormal. It makes us uncomfortable.

Power. (conscious/unconscious) to force people to be silent it is about the map, not the story.⁶ It is about erecting borders and marking space, territories through what Michel Foucault calls productive power. Power is not exercised only from the top of the hierarchical structure but exists in our everyday productions of power, between relationships, interrelations, on the ground actions between people. Productive power is "power that is exercised from innumerable points of interplay."⁷ When we consider the interplay of productive power exercised through hospitable silence, whose voice gets to be heard? Certainly not the dissenter's voice, nor the marginalized, or the affected--their stories are untold. The master narrative, as represented by Jill, becomes the polite story.⁸ All else is just uncivilized.

Ignorance. (unconscious) they were taught what to say, how to say it, and when is the appropriate time to speak.

*That's right. Be a good child. Hands on your lap.
Do not speak until you are spoken to.*

⁵ Dwight Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 5, (1985).

⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978).

⁸ Michel de Certeau states, "Social delinquency consists in taking the story literally, in making it the principle of physical existence where a society no longer offers its subjects or groups symbolic outlets and expectations of spaces, where there is no longer any alternative to disciplinary falling-into-line or illegal drifting away, that is, one form or another of prison and wandering outside the pale" (130). I argue hospitable silence is one tactic used to reinforce the lack of alternatives and outlets, to keep discipline and order in the matters of space. It is the articulation, and the embodiment of power in proxemics.

What do hospitable silences do?

Interpersonally, they affect those shushed. A hospitable silence is a powerful move to contain the transgressor, the dissenter, their agency, their voice, and their subject position. Using hospitable silence marks the transgressor's body as a space to contain the energy of the story left untold. The feeling of a frustrated stifling only builds, gets trapped within the body. Ultimately, the forced hospitable silence may mutate into anger, dismay, depression, a feeling of lack, and a sense of not belonging. It alienates.

Hospitable silence creates a false sense of security. It secures perceived borders and territories. It keeps the privileged safe and those perceived as different locked within the margins, the outskirts—perhaps just outside the window of the home, looking in, searching for access.

Hospitable silence affects all of us. We all lose the potential to really dig in deeply to the issues at stake within our personal, social and political worlds. We lose the opportunity to connect, to commune, to feel connection, even through conflict at home.

Home.

What is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where my parents live? Where I live and work as an adult? Where I locate my community, my people? Who are “my people”? Is home a geographical space, a historical space, an emotional, sensory space?

-Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*⁹

While engaging with the characters in their makeshift home, I was reminded of Mohanty's daunting questions that foreground the almost impossible characterization of the term *home*. The answers to these questions are highly political and realized through theoretical, performative, and discursive practices. The answers to these questions are evasive, complicated, and for me, created through local action.¹⁰ Throughout the performance the material, practical, and discursive applications of the term *home* shift as the performers cross borders through conversations, visual images, physical spaces, and their intersection of pluralistic identities, which ultimately end in

⁹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) 126.

¹⁰ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40 (1998) 522 states, “Feminist theory has sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context.”

hospitable silences. How then, within these silences, do we search for meaning, understanding, and positionality? How do we begin to create social change within these fragmented discourses and dialogues? Is beginning the dialogue enough, especially when it ends in this hospitable silence?

Within *Home*, heteronormative parameters were secured by the silence. When a moment of the conversation was actually fueled by transgressive content, real concrete pieces of emotive dialogue and riddled by the complexity of intersecting subject positions, these perceived outbursts were broken down and secured by the end of a conversation. The marked shushed interruption, the breaking, the lack of resolution, or attempt to carry any one conversation through,¹¹ was followed by hospitable questions about occupation and subjects in school. These hospitable questions always turned into a discussion of belonging, politically, socially, and physically. But again, the conversations were promptly shut down, laughed about, drawn away from the subject. Cigarette breaks, refilling of drinks, and the plastic smiling mother who kept asking, “Do we have to talk about this now?”

Shhh. We aren't supposed to talk about these things. Cocktails anyone?

Am I a part of your home?

Why of course, dear.

But I don't believe you. You don't know who I am, nor do you ask me.

Oh honey, just have another piece of pie.

Each of the characters in the performance communicated from their own positionality, and their own understanding of home thereby redefining home's centrality to their subject positions. Some felt safe—the father comfortable on the couch rarely spoke. Others felt alienated—the gay son coming home was not recognized as having come out. Jill, the mother, the keeper of this home, smiled, and happily avoided difficult topics, tempered the conversation. The performers so poignantly remind us that home spaces are not necessarily safe, nor are they spaces where voices are heard, at least not without interruption. Not only did each character seek to define a space of home through an almost inaudible discourse about the territories that were supposed to intersect but never did, they uncovered how alienated, removed, and distant they felt from their own forms of home.

¹¹ Enacting certain voices within this performance highlights viewpoints and silences other subject positions. Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs Identity,” *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Sage, 1996) 1-18, finds that identities operate through exclusion, through the discursive construction of a constitutive outside and the production of objected and marginalized subjects. The performance leaves cracks, openings, and fissures. When I listen intently to one subject position, the others seem to quiet, to disappear.

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Oh, Tommy? He's just not feeling well today. Nothing to worry about.

The characters moved in and out of their desire to belong, to transverse spaces, to converse in dialogue, yet, there was always something amiss, uncomfortable, and awkward. Each character had lost their sense of agency. Or perhaps it was just my agency, sitting in the audience wanting to interrupt, say something, anything. I wanted to ask the mother, Jill, for goodness sakes, to let them continue their conversation.

We're at home. Please have these conversations somewhere else.

Where else can we have these conversations? Going back to Mohanty's questions, how does this performance define and problematize home? A home can mean many different things—a place where one lives, a dwelling place with a social or family unity that occupies it, a valued place regarded as a refuge or place of origin.¹² A home is also created through the localized interactions that occur in certain temporal spaces. Rather than understanding home as a space of conformity and confidentiality,¹³ the temporary home erected in the small conference room integrated the complex diversities of living and non-living, institutional, social, cultural, ecological, personal, and local elements that exist there. *Home* felt quite icky, not because of the non-conformity, or the hilarious clash of personalities, but the fucking shushing.

Please don't cuss in my home. It is unladylike.

Hospitable silence has taken over our conversations in both our public and private spheres. As I read and reread the now wrinkled script in front of me, I move between my personal and intimate memories of home, the performance that reminded me in so many ways of the silences that surround my own family, my classroom, but most troubling—the connections to the stunting of dialogue within our society, in the name of security.

¹² Each paraphrased definition of home originated from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

¹³ Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?" *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa deLauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986): 209 state, "To the extent that identity is collapsed with home and community and based upon homogeneity and comfort, on skin, blood and heart, the giving up of home will necessarily mean the giving up of self and vice versa." The giving up of self, of the plurality and intersectionality of identities were surely subsumed and collapsed in this home. As each of the characters attempted to converse about their positions on crossing borders, between sexual orientation, national identities, gendered relationships between husband and wife, and the use of capital to purchase labor. The list of intersections brought up in this performance can go on and on. These intersections perpetuated silence. In this performance, the home was superficially secured by hospitable silence.

Security.

Our political climate pushes protestors behind metal gates, funnels any political dissent into the side streets. Media coverage of political unrest is now subsumed by an apathetic groan to soaring gas prices. It isn't too difficult to notice that certain realities and knowledges are more privileged than others, especially when we consider the damaging nature of polite conversation. Polite conversation doesn't include relationships of a non-heteronormative nature. Polite conversation does not address immigration rights, class issues, postcolonial, and neoliberal undertones. Polite conversation does not speak of the marginalized. "Subordinate people do not have the privilege of explicitness, the luxury of transparency, the presumptive norm of clear and direct conversation, free and open debate on a level playing field that the privileged classes take for granted."¹⁴ Polite conversation superficially secures the space for those with power to speak. The security is superficial because it keeps the perceived membrane-like borders erected, without interrogation.¹⁵ And these borders are leaky. Hospitable silence secures the hegemony of our public lives.

Home succeeded in pointing to the lack of a dialogic performance in our public lives. Most often, we do not perform what Dwight Conquergood would call a morally responsible performance intersecting different subjectivities and experiences, and voices, to "question, debate, and challenge one another."¹⁶ I don't want an end or a resolution to the dialogic performance, that's not the point. Yet, according to Robin Morgan, "There is a real challenge here, to be able to have these dialogues without relying on a logic of appropriation or just as significant, a denial of agency."¹⁷

That isn't appropriate conversation for the dinner table, the bar, the coffee shop. Actually, it isn't appropriate—ever.

The shhhhh within our public spaces challenges us to continue our conversations, to speak about apathy, ignorance, and the attempts to create social, political, and active changes within communities. I believe the performers in *Home* performed a cacophony of voices, an opening for differences, and possibilities.¹⁸ This performance

¹⁴ Dwight Conquergood, "Interventions and Radical Research," *The Drama Review* 46 (2002): 146.

¹⁵ Conquergood, "Interventions and Radical Research," 145.

¹⁶ Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act," 9.

¹⁷ Robin Morgan, "Planetary Feminism: The Politics of the 21st Century," *Sisterhood in Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (New York: Anchor, 1984): 116.

¹⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

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was an emancipatory practice, not in the traditional sense of Conquergood's *Poetics*,¹⁹ that asks performances to address and empower historically marginalized discourses, nor in the form of Langellier's *Personal Narratives*,²⁰ where personal narratives as cultural performances challenge and rewrite master narratives. Yet, *Home* points, quite heavily, to the contradictions inherent in the subject positions of those with power, access, and the voices loud enough to shush others. *Home* pulls from D. Soyini Madison's definition of dialogic performance, "charged by a desire for a generative and embodied reciprocity, sometimes with pleasure and sometimes with pain."²¹

Cough into your napkin, dear.

I don't want a perfect resolution. I don't desire the wrap-up, the clean package tied neatly with a bow. After all, performance has long been theorized as a space for possibility, kinesis, poesis, making. But I do wish, for all of us, for each of us, the ability to commune.

Intersecting Subject Positions: Let Us Commune.

To commune is to be in a state of intimate, heightened sensitivity and receptivity, as with one's surroundings.²² Commune is both a verb and a noun. As a verb, to commune is the act of coming together. To commune is to collaborate, to work together, in a joint intellectual effort, however uncomfortable this effort may become. To commune also means to stop producing sounds--to listen in the spaces. As a noun, commune is a material space, defined through and by spatial, geographical, and interpersonal relations. This performance offered space of commune within which we negotiated subject positions, identities, through conflicts, tensions.²³ Rather than understanding commune as a space of total understanding—blank communion without conflict, interrogation, and negotiation—I argue that a space of commune takes into account layers of personal and institutional negotiations, just as the

¹⁹ Dwight Conquergood, "Poetics, Play, Process, and Power: The Performative Turn in Anthropology," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 1(1989): 82-95.

²⁰ Kristen M. Langellier, "Personal Narratives: Perspectives on Theory and Research," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 9 (1989): 243-76.

²¹ D. Soyini Madison, "The Dialogic Performative in Critical Ethnography," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26 (2006): 320.

²² *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

²³ Chris Weedon, "Post-Structuralist Feminist Practice," *Theory/Pedagogy/Politics: Texts for Change*, Eds. Donald Morton and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh (Urbana: University of Oyster Bay Press, 1991): 47-63 states that understanding the plurality of meaning opens a doorway to understand experience as a complicated process of negotiation, which has the potential to challenge or reaffirm systems of power and oppression. I do believe that this performance both challenged and reaffirmed systems of power and oppression. Starting the dialogue is important, but closing it before it gets to the heart of it only lets the system exist as it is.

performers in *Home: Hospitality, Belonging, and the Nation* did and did not. “In the dialogic performative, the expressive and response frequencies of reciprocity spark disruptions in the mesmerizing effects to conform.”²⁴ Hospitable resolution, in the form of silence or a polite chuckle, only reifies what exists. As the interruptions continued, the silencing, the hospitable shhhhh marked both disruption and conformity in a dialogue that had only just begun. We need to open the space for the complex conversation, the difficult dialogue, the space to critically commune with one another.

Ultimately, I argue we need to push Conquergood’s concept of dialogic performance into the day to day, the local interactions with each other in varying spaces of home, through the space of commune. The utterance shhhhh that creates marked and uninvited silence, only reifies productive power structures. The local action, the conversation that happens in our living rooms, on the bus, in the streets, can mean something more than a polite negotiation of selves and opinions. It can speak to connection, not disillusioned privilege. The larger political action needs to begin here—right here, in and through our negotiations of security, politeness, difference, and fear.

My students knew that there was something wrong on campus a few days ago. They spoke with each other, fueled the rumors. They looked at me with wide eyes, searching for some comfort. I remained silent, in between the desire to disrupt the perpetrators disruption, or calm the tension by not addressing it. Looking back, my hospitable silence was cowardly and did nothing but keep the home superficially secure.

But we shouldn’t talk about these things.

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²⁴ Madison, 322.

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