

Biopolitical Banality in Living Out

Judith Rodriguez

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Prof. Eugene Holland

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Today more than ever, as productive forces tend to be completely de-localized, completely universal, they produce not only commodities but also rich and powerful social relationships. These new productive forces have no place, however, because they occupy all places, and they produce and are exploited in this indefinite non-place. The universality of human creativity, the synthesis of freedom, desire, and living labor, is what takes place in the non-place of the postmodern relations of production.

- Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri
Empire (2000)

In Living Out, Lisa Loomer introduces the audience to the character of Ana by berating her with offensive but supposed comic punch lines from the white bourgeois employer:

WALLACE. ...Where are you from?

ANA. Do you know where is Huntington Park?

WALLACE. No, I meant, where are you – (Gestures.) *from*?

ANA. Oh. I was born in El Salvador.

WALLACE. Good God, everyone is from El Salvador these days! (Laughs.) What happened to all the Mexicans?¹

The character of Wallace becomes a caricature of the white bourgeois mother living in Santa Monica, CA, while Ana is portrayed with few words but an obvious accent. The comic punch lines tend to be geared toward a bourgeois audience, as the comical offense is aimed toward the working class and people of color. In *Black Looks: Race and*

¹ Loomer, Living Out, 1.1.9-13.

Representation, bell hooks states, “The over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate – that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten.”² In short, the other is manipulated and exploited in order to appease the desires of white supremacy and Ana’s narrative is erased and her complexity as an undocumented domestic worker is reduced to a stereotype.

Contemporary re-presentations of Latin American and Mexican migrants serve the biopolitical matrix of preserving life in the name of labor. Foucault maintains that “the investment of the body, its valorization, and the distributive management of its forces” are the mechanisms employed in the production and reproduction of life.³ Living Out illustrates the propagation of laboring bodies implicated by markers of race, class, and citizenship. Therefore, the banality associated with the narratives of undocumented domestic workers in theatrical works such as that in Living Out becomes an apparatus utilized to maintain white supremacy through implicitly normalizing the hegemonic arrangement of the U.S. racial structure in order to sustain neoliberal delegations of power. This section unmask the productive forces at work in staging such scenarios.

In the Ohio State University Department of Theatre’s production playbill, the dramaturge, Tony Frank, maintains that Loomer “provides a story about two women striving to obtain the American Dream; that dream which promises us the possibility of prosperity and success regardless of social class or circumstances of birth.”⁴ The U.S.

² bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 39.

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 141.

⁴ Loomer, Living Out playbill, October-November 2011.

will not grant the character of Ana citizenship because she emigrated as an economic refugee and not as a political refugee from El Salvador. Moreover, Ana has not seen her 11-year-old son, Tomas, in 8 years and she is unrecognizable to him in a photograph sent to him as illustrated in the play. In comparison to Nancy's less urgent struggle of needing to work at a high paying entertainment law firm in order to afford living in the affluent city of Santa Monica, the dramaturge's assertion of the American Dream illustrates Loomer's ineffectual attempt at portraying a supposed shared humanity between the two women. Ana's affective experience as an undocumented economic refugee is disavowed in an attempt to disguise the raced and classed inequities of Ana and Nancy.

A critical analysis of the ideology of the American Dream is necessary to illustrate Ana and Nancy's disparity within the dominant systems of power in the U.S. The American Dream can be defined as a national philosophy embedded in the United States Declaration of Independence, which claims that "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights." This produces the illusion of possible prosperity in any individual that resides in the United States even though its ideology is based on the imperial foundations of the U.S. constitution. The writers of the United States constitution were inspired by the ancient imperialist model that believed in the expansion of its borders and the distribution of power into systems.⁵ Therefore, the foundational democracy from which the constitution originated worked to economically, politically, and socially disseminate its governing not only within the

⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), xiv.

United States, but beyond its borders to proliferate the ostensibly unfettering values of the constitution.

In their seminal book *Empire*, Hardt and Negri regard this imperial idea as one that “has survived and matured throughout the history of the United States constitution and has emerged now on a global scale in its fully realized form.”⁶ In the current era, the ideas of the constitution have erupted globally expanding its influence through Western neoliberal delegations of power. Neoliberalism is most commonly defined as an economic philosophy that opposes government intervention, and thereby, fosters the ideals of the free market. But in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey maintains, “We can . . . interpret neoliberalization either as a *utopian* project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism or as a *political* project to establish the conditions for a capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites.”⁷ In short, the former provides the hegemonic discourses for the justification of the latter’s endeavor. Government is always already interconnected with knowledge production in neoliberalism and this interconnection implicitly and consistently produces a market-based populist culture substantiated in democracy.

Although neoliberalism’s present powers are not limited to any global geographical region, the American Dream as utilized in the U.S. could be used as a utopian apparatus contained in neoliberalism’s political notion that the object of neoliberal regulation is the propagation of labor for the accumulation of capital, and

⁶ Ibid, xiv.

⁷ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19.

therefore delivers the prime model form of biopower⁸ considering the Dream's insistence on the prosperous reproduction of life. Furthermore, one gains a sense of individuality by way of labor resulting in prosperity and comfort through the ideology of the Dream. Considering its effective influence on the population, the positive assumptions of the American Dream can be used as an apparatus to subjugate people into various forms of labor and modes of domination in the neoliberal state.

Examining the ideology of the American Dream from the perspective of neoliberalism places Living Out into a larger context. If taking into account the significance of the effects of neoliberalism on non-citizen subjects for the extraction of their labor, Living Out could epistemically provide the audience with unencumbered portrayals of the candid affect experienced by undocumented immigrants existing on the periphery of the U.S. Therefore, one can consider how the play could be staged as an epic Brechtian piece produced to provoke thought and discussion. Incongruously, the style of Living Out appears to exhibit qualities of a television sitcom as opposed to an epic Brechtian tragicomedy. Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre calls for an analytical observation of the performance of the play rather than the spectators cathecting themselves to the outcome of the dramatic narrative.⁹ Loomer instead reinforces the spectator's cultural assumptions and provides them with marketable representations of the immigrant domestic worker and her white bourgeois employer. The actors supply comprehensive characterizations and conventional mannerisms to typecast the characters. Loomer refrains from providing a thought-provoking epic piece for the audience, and

⁸ In Michael Hardt's article "Affective Labor" he defines biopower as "the power of the emerging forces of governmentality to create, manage, and control populations – the power to manage life." Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor" in *boundary 2* (26:2, 1999), 98.

⁹ Paraphrased from *Brecht on Theatre*, (23).

instead employs the style of the television sitcom to provide the consumer with the cultural assumptions that they presume regarding the other.

The American television sitcom uses the ideology of the American Dream to further its implication of fantastical situation comedy. Even non-traditional sitcoms such as “Will & Grace” (1998-2006) exhibit what Jasbir Puar calls “homonormative ideologies” that mirror the heteronormative ideals possessing the hierarchal categories that sustain the dominant systems of power. Bodies residing outside of the homo/heteronormative ideals can be considered a threat to national security.¹⁰ The undocumented immigrant exists outside homo/heteronormative ideals because they are othered, excluded, and even viewed as terrorists in the post-9/11 decade. Therefore, the character of Ana is an excluded subject in the ideology of the Dream, as she does not possess the ability to enjoy class mobility as a non-citizen of the U.S. From Nancy’s hierarchal position as a citizen and consumer of the Dream, she is able to dominate Ana as her employer. Nancy’s private household becomes a site of governing through conditional, sometimes exploitable policy, as Ana is restricted from worker’s rights as an illegal immigrant. Inserting comedy into the household provokes an absurd setting that would succeed if Loomer were employing the epic epistemological approach of Bertolt Brecht. The sitcom comedy instead demonstrates the contradiction of appropriating the undocumented domestic working experience for situational comedy in Living Out. Moreover, it provides the distinction between Ana and Nancy’s modes of labor.

¹⁰ See Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* for more information on her theories of “homonationalism.” I utilize Puar’s theory of homonationalism to illustrate the methods by which the American sitcom comedy uses capitalist ideologies, such as the “American Dream,” to provide a sense of nationalism and citizenship through the innocuous relational expression of laughter.

Michael Hardt's notion of affective and immaterial labor can be applied to the characters of Ana and Nancy's divergent emotional responses to their work and mothering in Living Out. As an entertainment lawyer, Nancy's work is associated with immaterial labor, "the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity".¹¹ Nancy's industry is concentrated on the creation and manipulation of affect, which allows her the capability to dominate others on the hierarchal level of human relations that are dominated by capital. Hardt explains in his article "Affective Labor," "In the production and reproduction of affects, in those networks of culture and communication, collective subjectivities are produced and sociality is produced – even if those subjectivities and that sociality are directly exploited by capital."¹² Although Hardt perceives an enormous potential in affective labor as enriching production to the level of "complexity of human interaction," he goes on to claim that there are many divisions that exist within the sphere of immaterial labor due to race, socioeconomic status, and so forth.¹³ These divisions disprove Ana and Nancy's "shared humanity." Because Ana is an undocumented immigrant caregiver, her affective labor is produced and manipulated by Nancy as the white entertainment lawyer, thereby contradicting their illusory shared affects as mothers and financial supporters.

It is ideologically misleading to represent the characters of Ana and Nancy under uniting signifiers such as "women" and "women's work." The affect that is produced by the emblematic power of gendered labor forces itself on the bodies of Ana and Nancy

¹¹ This definition was taken from Maurizio Lazzarato's article "Immaterial Labor." <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm> accessed on November 22, 2011.

¹² Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor" in *boundary 2* (26:2, 1999), 96.

¹³ Ibid, 97.

differently. This is exemplified in Living Out after Ana's son dies as a result of choosing to care for Nancy's child rather than her own. She exclaims to her husband:

Ana. (*After a beat.*) If I'd picked him up... If I'd been there. Like a mother. Like any mother. (*Starts to break.*) I never saw him play soccer, Bobby! Did he play good? Did he look for me? Tell me, Bobby! 'Cause I never saw him play!¹⁴

Ana's mothering is directly influenced by whether or not she is needed by Nancy to take care of her daughter. She is financially dependent upon Nancy to bring her son from El Salvador and for the time allotted to care for her own son in the U.S. Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez gives an effective description of the affect experienced by illegal immigrant domestic workers. She states, "The impression of feelings of 'invisibility' and 'worthlessness' are symptomatic of the cultural logic of abjection, evolving within a racializing and feminizing script of power, prescribed migration policies, the coloniality of power and feminization of labor."¹⁵ The affect produced by Ana's labor as undocumented caregiver and mother to her children imprints her body and mind with suffering, marking the divided sociality among Ana and Nancy, thus challenging their "shared humanity" imposed by Loomer.

The re-presentation of undocumented domestic workers thus becomes analogous to the transference of the affective commodity of migrant domestic labor as illustrated in Living Out. For instance, in explaining why their undocumented caregivers lie to them, the character of Linda, a white affluent mother, explains to Nancy:

LINDA. (*Sensitively.*) Well ... It's not that they actually lie ... It's a cultural thing, I had a girlfriend who lived in Mexico for a summer and she explained it to me. See, they don't consider it "lying" – they just don't want you to be unhappy! It's easier to say,

¹⁴ Loomer, Living Out, 2.9.17.

¹⁵ Encarnacion Gutierrez-Rodriguez, "Migration, Domestic Work, and Affect" in *Historical Social Research* (Vol. 33, No. 1, 2008), 4.

“My mother is sick in Guatemala” than “I just got a job for a dollar more an hour.” The thing is they’re just such sweet people. Especially the Mexicans.¹⁶

Linda’s allusion to her caregiver’s “dishonesty” as a “sweet” trait that all undocumented domestic workers possess tacitly implicates the caregiver as an embodied commodity belonging to Linda – one that is defective. The transference from commodity to spectacle provides the spectator, not with the character of Ana’s own psychic property of feeling, but with social possessions of neoliberal delegations of power – that delegation being re-presented through the character of Linda. This idea implicates the mainstream institution of theatre to notions of the shifting commodity of capital and power along the U.S.-Mexico border, and thereby, exposes this mainstream institution as an extension of what Gramsci terms “hegemony,” or what Said expands to “cultural hegemony.”

Cultural hegemonic discourses embedded within the text of Living Out serve the ambiguous color-blindness asserted by neoliberal multiculturalism. Jodi Melamed discusses a characteristic of neoliberal multiculturalism as departing from previous racism’s focus on phenotype and positioning human structural inequalities as natural. Melamed writes, “The new racism deploys economic, ideological, cultural, and religious distinctions to produce lesser personhoods, laying these new categories of privilege and stigma across conventional racial categories, fracturing them into differential status groups.”¹⁷ The theoretical implications that Melamed proposes elucidate the naturalization of the structural deficiencies associated with the undocumented domestic worker so perpetuated by Loomer in Living Out.

¹⁶ Loomer, Living Out, 1.10.11-17.

¹⁷ Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism,” 14.

For example, in scene three of Living Out Wallace (the more explicitly privileged white bourgeois mother), Linda (the white bourgeois mother that attempts to show compassion for the undocumented nannies), and Nancy (Ana's employer) discuss Ana's employment:

WALLACE. . . . Do you have a good Nanny?

NANCY. Yes, our caretaker – *caregiver* – seems very nice.

LINDA. Great!

WALLACE. How long have you had her?

NANCY. Oh, we just hired her. She officially starts Friday.

WALLACE. Well, that's smart, so if it doesn't work out you just call over the weekend. Does she read?

Nancy struggles with labeling Ana's work with a sense of personhood even though Ana's personhood is directly correlated with her labor, while Wallace *explicitly* disavows Ana's personhood by referring to Ana by her commodity of labor as Linda *implicitly* illustrates above. Living Out materializes Melamed's notion of neoliberal multiculturalism through its production on stage and the labored affect produced by the spectators.

Tony Frank (the dramaturge) describes Living Out as “a funny and heart-warming story based upon real people who still believe in the ideology of the American Dream” (Living Out playbill, 10-11/11). This description allows the idea of race-neutrality to intersect with the neoliberal idea of the American Dream, thus constructing the ambiguity of neoliberal multiculturalism. Comparing the undocumented Latina working experience to a white entertainment lawyer from Santa Monica serves as a mode of color-blind racism preserves white supremacy without exposing those that it subjugates and those that it rewards.¹⁸ Frank's color-blind assertion reduces Ana's struggle for a bearable life to one of banality. In *The World is a Ghetto*, Howard Winant maintains, “Appeals to

¹⁸ For more information on color-blind racism see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's book *Racism Without Racists*.

white superiority will not serve, as they did in the bad old days. Law, political and human rights, as well as concepts of equality, fairness, and human difference will therefore increasingly be framed in ‘race-neutral’ terms.”¹⁹ Frank and Loomer attempt to neutralize the racial conflict in Living Out by conforming them to “real people” who allegedly “share a humanity.” It produces a false commonality between Ana and Nancy that erases Ana’s racialized, subjugated body. The appropriation of illegal immigration for comical, situational content as entertainment demeans the struggle that exists for the immigrant’s class mobility, even their survival in the U.S. The next section examines the performance technologies utilized to stage such an appropriation for entertainment purposes.

¹⁹ Howard Winant, *The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 35.

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