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Writing Neoliberal Values

Rhetorical Connectivities and Globalized Capitalism

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*To my activist parents, Erwin Riedner and
Susan Spiegler Riedner,
with much love and appreciation.*

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Preface

Writing Human Interest Stories: Present and Future Value

A short news story distributed by the *Interpress News Service (INS)* from Ananatagirl, India, entitled, “Sun Shines on Forest Women,” describes solar panels that enable women to modernize, and make more efficient, their traditional herb- and seed- gathering. As one woman comments, “The government has so many welfare schemes. But for forest women like us, the best scheme is one that will help us become economically independent. If the government installs [a] solar charging station in each of our villages, we can expand this business and change our future.” As I will argue in this book, this description presents an orderly, vivid, and unsubstantial portrait that embodies the cultural and economic values of neoliberalism. The story uses the language of personal responsibility, independence, and freedom, as well as discussion of the benevolence of outside donors, to narrate the benefits of women’s participation in the global market. As Wendy Brown (2003) argues, it presents a positive portrait of women who “tend to their own present and future value.”

In a short, intense interview broadcast on National Public Radio’s (NPR’s) Story Corp program, a Native-American woman named Storm Reyes recounts how she left Native-American migrant camps in the Pacific Northwest. As Ms. Reyes tells the NPR audience, she grew up in rough, poor, and dire conditions in where there was little hope for a better life: “. . . I learned [how] to fight with a knife long before I learned how to ride a bicycle. And when you are grinding day after day after day, there is no room in you for hope. There just isn’t. You don’t even know it exists. There’s nothing to aspire to except filling your hungry belly. That’s how I was raised.”¹ Ms. Reyes goes on to explain that she was able to leave the migrant camps because she was introduced to reading through a bookmobile program. Books offered her an glimpse of a different life and a different world. As she says, “I knew there was a world outside of the camps. I believed I could find a place in it. And I did.” Her story ends happily, as she left the migrant camp and became a librarian.

Both the stories of the Indian herb- and seed-gatherers and the story of Ms. Reyes are striking and powerful examples of human-interest stories: short and intensively affective, melodramatic, and spectacular accounts about the tenacity of singular individuals who are able to lift themselves out of poverty and marginality through their own hard work, individual worthiness, the effects of modernity (solar panels and books), as well as the good deeds of others (support of NGOs, of the Indian government, and of the librarian from the bookmobile). By focusing on individual cases, human-interest stories create portraits of worthy, valued people—often women—who are brought into the technologies of modernity, allowing them to participate in and contribute to markets. Whereas before they were impoverished and marginalized, they can now speak and act to better their own lives. Human-interest stories celebrate their entrance into economic and social life. These stories are written and circulated to demonstrate that poverty and violence can be overcome, and that prosperity is in reach and is accessible to formerly marginalized people who embrace modern life. Written into the values and benefits of modern life, previous marginalized herb- and seed-growers and impoverished Native Americans who have managed to survive now have agency and social voice. In other words, human-interest stories affirm the capacity of a new economic and political order—neoliberalism—to recognize previously impoverished populations, asserting that this brave new world can bring economic stability and freedom from violence, and can recognize racialized, gendered, and sexual differences for those who can articulate their own present and future value.

Both the account of the *INS* and the NPR *Story Corp* segment are deliberately short: they are singular, spectacular examples that deploy values of self-responsibility and of entrepreneurialism. These are not detailed or substantial historical accounts of the complex, historical situations of herb- and seed-gatherers or of the Native-American groups of the Pacific Northwest. The intention of human-interest stories is to produce and circulate affective response rather than a complex understanding of the events described. Readers are not told about the historical and material conditions that shaped Ms. Reyes's life or about the cultural and social contexts that she navigated.² The *INS* account of Indian women does not explain their relationship to the nation-state (there is the implication that it is often ineffective), nor the complex historical and material conditions that continue to shape their lives. The NPR human-interest story relies on the reader's understanding that Native-Americans have been and continue to be marginalized, and that their communities are beset with violence. Yet, there is no analysis of the historical and

material conditions that contribute to an understanding of Ms. Reyes's situation. Rather, the sensational, dramatic rhetoric of the stories offer hopeful assurances that in the current moment individuals and groups can move from marginalization to recognition.

These human-interest stories have a typical structure, a typical trajectory, and a typical outcome: lack of education and gendered poverty are a threat to "freedom" and agency, particularly for poor women. Yet, individual resourcefulness and external aid can produce progress and a happy (even heroic) outcome. Moreover, there is an implicit claim that telling and circulating powerful stories of singularly resourceful people—mostly women—provides evidence that the current political and social settlement is just, and is creating a good global society. This type of narrative story is circulated and repeated in similar accounts.

I argue in this book that affective human-interest stories warrant deeper consideration because the sensations they evoke and the melodrama they narrate, which celebrates the marketization of individuals and of social life, does not attend to the violence that is immanent to their narratives. Ms. Reyes's and the Indian herb- and seed-gatherers' stories are ones of hopeful uplift. But they are also stories of violence (Ms. Reyes learns how to fight at an early age) and of the precariousness of individuals and populations (the Indian gatherers are impoverished). Yet, neither story invites interrogation of the violence that it evokes or of the complex reasons for poverty and exclusion. Rather, readers are called to celebrate individual ability and success—the promise that exceptional, motivated people can find their way out with the assistance of benevolent outsiders or benevolent organizations—and the expectation that violence and poverty can be overcome. These stories call for further exploration of the violence that is on the surface of their narratives but that is not pursued or explored.

Consequently, this book takes as its object neoliberal human-interest stories: short, intense, texts that associate the social values of self-responsibility, inclusion, and freedom with the economic values of privatization, free markets, and free trade. The subjects of these stories are self-reliant women who enter regional and global markets, women who grow gardens and sustain their families and communities in hard times, or female sex workers who are saved by social-safety nets. As I read them, these stories tell us how neoliberal political economic values are written into everyday life—their "modes of composition, its rhetoric, its metaphors, its language, its fiction" (Derrida 2006, 37). Human-interest stories, as well as other neoliberal texts, create and circulate affective

fictions in which the activities of responsible, self-reliant individuals are correlated with neoliberal economic aims.

The first objective of this book is to show how neoliberal values are circulated through compressed rhetorical formations such as human-interest stories in order to orient values to contemporary formations of the capitalist political economy. Neoliberalism, as an economic theory, values strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade as a means by which to assure individual and social freedom. As an economic and political practice, neoliberalism means the global expansion of markets and service economies, the upward distribution of wealth, and the withdrawal of state services. It also means smaller, less perceptible, but no less significant micro-transformations at the level of everyday life to meet the demands of neoliberal economic values, particularly the reformulation of subjectivities to produce specific kinds of workers for neoliberal economies (Kelly 2003, 18–19; Duggan 2004, 11–13; Bedford 2009, xiv–xv; Ong 2007, 9; Shenk 2015). As a means of forming and regulating subjectivities, neoliberalism is a cultural dynamic that creates “responsible and entrepreneurial citizens,” and that, as Michael Goldman argues, “penetrates the most intimate relations people have with each other” (cited in Bedford 2009, xv).

Produced by an overdetermined system of contemporary governance that includes economic policies, rule of law, moral justifications, affective sensations, social values, and formations of subjectivities, neoliberalism uses narrative forms that, in so doing, enable it to, as Gayatri Spivak notes, to “congratulate itself for progress, even if by default” (1999, 91). Neoliberal discourses invoke and promise economic and political empowerment, political inclusion, and freedom from violence, and they highly regard independence and personal self-responsibility. This rhetoric claims that neoliberal values are inherently progressive, moving beyond state-sponsored exclusions in the United States and other Western nations—exclusions embedded in colonialist systems—into new freedoms of multicultural “tolerance.” Neoliberal rhetorics appear to offer recognition, freedom, and incorporation through participation in capitalist markets. In so doing, they traffic in melodramatic and sensational feelings, shaping and orienting our affective energies toward the authority of institutions and the nation-state, as well as toward value of “freedom” of global markets.

Yet, as I will argue, these discourses seek to persuade readers that neoliberalism includes the representation of entrepreneurial, self-motivated people at the same time as other individuals and populations remain outside of the new political economies and global publics. This persuasion

is created through affective fictions that shore up economic structures, political arrangements, and social consent for processes of capitalist accumulation. These affective fictions write narratives that explain and justify neoliberal political economy and its cultural politics. Accordingly, this book investigates how a persuasive genre such as human-interest stories writes brief, affective narratives in which progress and freedom can be claimed and, in so doing, creates subjects who identify with its “progressive” framework. In sum, the rhetoric that I find in human-interest stories composes fictions of everyday life in order to validate and create consent for neoliberal culture and political economy.

The next project of this book is one of rhetorically analyzing, decompressing, dismantling, and disrupting the affective fictions of human-interest stories. Within a large number of stories that circulate the values of self-reliance, self-responsibility, and freedom, I focus on one affective, melodramatic genre through which to track how subjects are written so that neoliberalism can claim inclusion, freedom, and progress. By analyzing human-interest stories as a “genre of affect,” I argue that their claims for freedom are delimited. Human-interest stories, to echo Saba Mahmood, uncritically write neoliberal freedom through “a pre-defined teleology of emancipatory politics,” producing prescribed, familiar scenarios that displace a more complex understanding of events onto singular stories and individuals (cited in Anker 2014, 11, 16). Yet, even as human-interest stories select and create fictional accounts, they contain bits and pieces of discourse that suggest that some populations are still outside of neoliberal representations and cultures. And, they suggest activities that are excessive of these values.

The third project of this book is pedagogical and activist, rewriting human-interest stories to create feminist literacies that bring affective human-interest stories to crisis.³ For example, as human-interest stories are written to demonstrate a community’s recognition and inclusion of immigrant workers, they include oblique references to unsafe working conditions that these workers face. Stories that recount how sex workers are saved by government grants include brief references to sex workers who are not saved because they have children. Hopeful stories about women who receive support in halfway houses reference entire populations who are economically and socially marginalized. Although they are briefly referenced, these bits and pieces of discourse cannot be used to narrate optimistic stories about how the market offers affirmation and economic opportunity to previously marginalized people. Stories about how entrance into the market creates freedom cannot be told about sex workers who cannot afford to leave set work; vagrants;

migrant workers; young, queer, and impoverished men with HIV; and others who need social support and political recognition. These figures lack affective value—they cannot be circulated to shore up consent for neoliberal political economic arrangements—and are therefore indecipherable within these stories.

At the same time as I analyze how rhetorics correlate lives with the neoliberal political economy, I look for discursive moments within human-interest stories that exceed neoliberal narrative. In each human-interest story, there are moments of excess where subjects who lack affective value briefly emerge and then fade from view yet who are not analyzed within texts themselves. These bits and pieces point to lives that quickly become ghostlike—brief effects that suggest activities and events that do not leave a lasting written imprint and that quickly fade from view. Working with these discursive fragments, this book explores who is affectively valuable because they can be written (and stories about them can be circulated) through intensive, melodramatic fictions of self-sufficiency, individualism, and self-responsibility. Concurrently, the book explores who lacks affective value: those who cannot produce melodramatic affects because they need state services, and who do not contribute labor or affect to neoliberal political economy. Their lives and experiences cannot communicate, perform, or circulate a recognizable social script, and are therefore illegible in market rhetoric.⁴ As the book argues, brief, ephemeral discursive moments within human-interest stories that exceed neoliberal narrative can be rewritten to track production of consent for neoliberalism, and, at the same time, point to rhetorical possibilities that these texts could suggest.

Building on these brief moments, I ask: Is it possible, by working within the rhetoric of human-interest stories, to conjure something else from an affective yet violent, compromised archive? Can we negotiate with compromised texts, marking rhetorical moments when they violently differentiate between who can be represented and included, and who cannot? Can we decompress stories that are that are “so compressed that one isn’t sure whether the intensity that sparks through them is due more to the vividness of the words or to the jostling violence of the facts they tell” (Foucault 1994, 157), and begin to write more complex stories that circulate around these ghostly figures? Is it possible to track how affective rhetoric of inclusion and freedom enables (and disguises) violence, expanding an analysis of how this rhetoric is linked to wider political, economic, cultural, and discursive formations of neoliberalism that are at work? At the same time, is it possible to write hints and traces of people, events, and labor that are outside of neoliberal rhetoric,

using these hints and traces to suggest other stories and other political imaginaries? Within a violent archive, can we find ghostly figures of the living dead—those who are abandoned to decay, neglect, and death—and use the rhetorical moments when they briefly appear to imagine critique, rupture, and futures not yet imagined? Is this work with rhetorical violence possible, as Saidya Hartman asks, “without committing further violence in the act of narration?” (2008). Is it possible to redirect affective value?

This book joins an effort by contemporary rhetoricians, cultural-studies scholars, and feminist scholars to understand affective genres and structures of feeling of everyday life in neoliberalism, and to generate analysis of the current conjuncture that pushes current settlements in different directions. My project is to read against and beyond affective fictions, looking at who appears and who disappears into narrative. These moments can be read to identify modes of composition, rhetorics, metaphors, and narrative structures that distinguish between whose lives are valuable, transmittable, impressionable, and representable and those whose lives are not affective and are therefore vulnerable to abandonment and death. Reading neoliberal human-interest stories can also point to moments that exceed neoliberal rhetoric, hints and traces of discourse that are embedded in these stories but that are not attended to by the dominant narrative. As I track how neoliberalism works rhetorically, I am also interested in the capacity of these discourses to suggest different relationships to political economy, and to different kinds of knowledge and imaginaries. In a Marxist vein, I’m interested in rewriting use-value that is outside the representation of value, yet that remains inside a system of exchange. In this situation, I am interested in creating a crisis of affective value by reading human-interest stories into an analysis of violence and neoliberal power. If every articulation of neoliberalism, and every rearticulation of neoliberalism, could generate new modes of composition, fictions, strategies, motifs, and affects, the project of the book is to develop different protocols of reading this affective, compromised, violent archive. With attention to rhetorical violence that claims to offer affirmation and inclusion but that extends death, abandonment, neglect, and violence, I explore the possibilities of writing against and beyond neoliberalism.

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