

The Illegalities of Brownness

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In Memoriam: José Esteban Muñoz, 1967–2013

I am beginning a conversation with myself about defining my being by laws that really can never summarize my existence. . . . Right now there is confusion all around me. There is a national campaign to pass the DREAM Act, Obama announced his Deferred Action. . . . There is a trend of folks writing about us, documenting us, wanting to hear us, wanting for us to come out of the shadows, wanting us to feel empowered, and for some reason I cannot seem to get past the fact that we are still not addressing our emotional well-being, not as undocumented people but as migrants, displaced people, folks whose hearts have been broken by America's lies.

—Yosimar Reyes, *The Legalities of Being*

Between October 2013 and September 2014, the US Border Patrol apprehended close to seventy thousand unaccompanied minors from Central America trying to cross the border.¹ The large number of detained children created a political crisis this past July, one so pressing that President Barack Obama asked Congress for \$3.7 billion in emergency funds to address this situation.² Of the president's original proposed budget, \$1.8 billion would have been distributed to the Department of Health and Human Services, and \$1.5 billion would go to the Department of Homeland Security. Children have arrived at the border as political refugees, and while Obama certainly addressed the precarity of their lives by funding public health agencies, the state has also answered these children with a plan to equally increase the militarization of the borderlands and to enforce a regime of law that protects the border by curtailing their "illegal" existence as subjects worthy of human status.³

In her recent interview with Jorge Ramos, former secretary of state Hillary Clinton declared that Obama's administration should respond to the crisis not by requesting funds but by denying children protection

under the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008: “Whoever was in the category of where they don’t have legitimate claim for asylum, where they don’t have some kind of family connection, those children should be returned to their families and the families should be told that they should not be sending these young children on their own to face the dangers that exist on that travel.”²⁴ Clinton did not argue against the implementation of this legislation, but she called for a displacement of legal responsibility for these children’s lives. Instead of offering them protection according to the law, she wished to force children to establish their “legitimate claim for asylum” in order to be recognized and treated as political refugees. Children who cannot provide sufficient proof of their precarity would be sent back to their irresponsible families, those who ought to be scolded for forcing their children to face perilous journeys on their own. Clinton recognizes that these children who have just crossed our borders have faced the dangers of rape, human trafficking, and harsh traveling conditions, but her recognition of their suffering is less concerned with sharing compassion with their lives. She is more interested in proposing that the Department of Homeland Security send them back to where they came from and then build a network of military states that would police the movement of children and other migrants between the borders of Central and North America: “We should be setting up a system in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador to screen kids over there, before they get in the hands of coyotes, or they get on the ‘Beast,’ or they’re raped. Terrible things happen to them.”²⁵ Her plan is not just designed to deny US legal responsibility for the lives of refugee migrant children by turning them into things that could be screened “over there,” in distant places where violence occurs safely away from our borders. Most perplexingly, she is suggesting that no state make itself responsible for these lives when she asks Central American governments to screen and derail them from crossing but does not ask them to sustain the lives of their citizens within their borders so they do not risk their lives trying to find citizenship elsewhere. If these children do survive the dangers of migration across multiple military borders and arrive in the United States, Clinton would have Obama’s government send them back and face these perils again. Denied access to viable modes of citizenship in their home countries and denied entry upon arrival here, these children are in a state of rightlessness, detained and managed by Homeland Security.

As state-sponsored responses to migrant lives, Obama’s and Clinton’s plans are vivid revelations that the gatekeepers of citizenship are not invested in creating a world where migrant subjects can dwell without the threat of terrorizing governance. This constant terror demands a shifting of ideological frameworks with which to understand our present futures: since the state has proved unable to uphold the social contract of

democracy, I turn to cultural agents as political theorists who articulate citizenship in a language that runs counter to these plans to cloak migrant children in the garbs of rightlessness. The cultural forms produced by the migrant rights movements are the sites where we can begin to theorize a way toward a different mode of being and belonging besides our violent present. Indeed, at the heart of my article are forms of Latina/o popular music, social media, and digital art that seek to radically alter sociality and bring about freedom, equity, and equality.

One of the most vibrant components of social movements toward migrant rights is the Dreamers Adrift collective: “A creative project ABOUT undocumented youth, BY undocumented youth, and FOR undocumented youth [who] are trying to document the undocumented [by] putting [their] life on display through videos, art, music, spoken word, prose and poetry.”⁶ Created by four undocumented college students, the project “represent[s] 1 DREAM for countless others” who “are fighting towards the passage of the DREAM Act.” Originally introduced in 2001, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) will offer undocumented youth a pathway toward legal residency in the United States. In 2012, Dreamers Adrift released *The Legalities of Being*, a video collaboration between two undocumented queer artists from California: the poet Yosimar Reyes and the visual artist Julio Salgado, both of whom are self-taught masters of artistic creation.⁷ For the video, Salgado joined Reyes to sketch his poetry on paper, and their collaboration produced a surreal meditation on the affective lives of migrants that are anything but surreal. *The Legalities of Being* gives a palpating heart to those subjects who are legally rendered nonexistent as a practice of everyday life in the United States. To *feel* the video and to *listen* to the artists’ wounds and hopes, their viewers have but to watch as Salgado uses his pens to illustrate the words spoken by Reyes: when the poet speaks, the drawings render his aurality into a haunting manifestation of unfreedom and injustice.

For Reyes and Salgado, their sonic and visual artistry is an invitation for us to recognize that to live as a nonlegal person in the United States today means living without ontology. The poet cannot bring himself to recognize “[his] being by laws [that] really can never summarize [his] existence” because what the law indexes are not what he considers markers of human life. Rather than addressing the lives of migrants as displaced people and sensorial beings, the law will only register them as “undocumented” aliens in need of submission to its rule of order. Migrant lives are insensible to the law that is only interested in quantifying and qualifying their existence, turning them into something that can be screened for legal registration, as Clinton would have it.

As the artists document the undocumented through sonic and visual

manifestations without legality, *The Legalities of Being* hails a humanity that by law cannot exist: Brownness. The late José Esteban Muñoz theorized “feeling brown” as a racial performativity that could redefine the affective markers sustaining normative and oppressive structures of national citizenship.⁸ In his influential article “‘Chico, What Does It Feel Like to Be a Problem?’ The Transmission of Brownness,” Muñoz argued that, rather than abandoning the negative affects of minoritarian subjects, sociality could be radically altered by organizing Latinas/os as a collective conditioned by common negative affects.⁹ Minoritarian subjects could alter an oppressive public social sphere by recognizing and sharing the experiences of feeling like a problem amid an antibrown normative world, thus coming together under the guise of Brownness. As a theory of being and becoming, Muñoz’s ideas are most generative and inspiring for scholars who, in the words of Deborah Paredez, think of his work as “the source of illumination against which we positioned our own bodies of work in the hopes of being made to seem more luminous, more clearly defined. . . . [Muñoz] named our feelings and their relationship to our (lack of) access to citizenship.”¹⁰

My own understanding of racial performativity, feelings, and citizenship is largely inspired by Muñoz’s call to theorize the processes “that [block] the Latina/o citizen-subject’s trajectory to ‘official’ citizenship-subject political ontology.”¹¹ This central tenet of Muñoz’s work aligns Brownness with the artists I am invoking. His insistence that affective difference is a key to imagining an other world besides oppression is a calling whose sounds are also registered in *The Legalities of Being* and the Dreamers Adrift collective: both Brownness and “illegality” are propelled by a utopian longing for modes of being and belonging that resist the present and its devastation of brown lives. *The Legalities of Being* and its creators insist that the constitution of Brownness takes place amid an endless precarity, with the deportation, incarceration, and death of brown subjects always already sanctioned by the state. If racial violence is the order of the day, what potential do the present and its futures have for being beyond terror? What does the Brownness of migrants and other deportable subjects propose as the time of the present and the future times of freedom? These are the questions that echo Reyes’s and Salgado’s call for other modes of being besides legality.

The links between the world of “illegality” and the discourse of Brownness also hinge on a point of divergence when both understand citizenship on two different registers. Muñoz originates his understanding of official citizenship-subjectivity within frameworks that are not specifically derived from the law of governance, whereas “illegality” is conditioned by the denial of access to human existence as a fact of the law. Brownness stems from the experiences of minoritarian exile from official markers

of citizenship where Latinas/os register as citizen-subjects endowed with legal status but are nonetheless denied access to official political ontology. When Muñoz invokes the language of political citizenship, he recognizes the Latina/o subject as a citizen who is endowed with minimal ontological valiance and dwells in the world without normative citizen rights. Contrary to the Latina/o citizen, Reyes's words and Salgado's drawings witness that the "illegal" has no political ontological leverage at all before a state whose "official" eyes are only concerned with summarizing their (non)existence.

I situate the work of Brownness within this incoherence: if brown feelings can alter social formations and pave the way toward a more egalitarian and utopic future, then the feelings of "illegal" brown subjects have the potential to radically alter sociality in an antibrown world by visualizing and sounding out a future that is not entrenched in an aberration of democracy. The aural and visual circuitry of migrant suffering theorizes belonging and citizenship outside of the state and terrorizing governance, and I argue that as practices of everyday life under terror, the ethical imperative of Brownness means to refute the claims of democracy and to perform sites of emancipation. The illegalities of Brownness make "the point that hope is spawned of a critical investment in utopia, which is nothing like naïve but, instead, profoundly resistant to the stultifying temporal logic of a broken present."¹² Reyes hails migrants as sensory beings worthy of a political ontology when he asks us all to feel the "folks whose hearts have been broken by America's lies," and this political ontology resists the urge to reduce human life to the legal parameters of citizenship. Untimely fierce, his words resonate all too loudly with the Central American children who have escaped a shattered present in order to hope for a future for brown lives where "illegality" is not the order of the day.

Mourning and the Browning of "Illegality"

Muñoz calls on minority subjects who are kept from accessing citizenship proper in the United States to redirect our negative feelings toward a different sense of belonging in negativity. Instead of answering the question, what does it feel like to be a problem?, by reproducing the negative feelings introjected as a result of being made to feel like we are a problem, he suggests we begin by recognizing and understanding how it is that non-normative bodies feel and are made to feel racially and ethnically different in a white world. As he argues, what "unites and consolidates people [is] the way in which they perform affect, especially in relation to an official 'national affect' that is aligned with a hegemonic class," and this recognition of affective difference could create a collective that "unites and consolidates oppositional groups."¹³ Since bodies "feeling brown" may

be perceived as a problem in a nonbrown world simply because we are different to a white society, Muñoz is interested in understanding how this act of recognizing difference as a problem may also see “feeling like a problem [as] a mode of belonging, a belonging through recognition.”¹⁴ If a racial or ethnic minority is hailed as a problem because she is not coded white and is henceforth made to feel different, there is a potential for creating something positive out of the negativity projected onto nonnormative citizen-subjects. The potential arises not so much out of attempting to “fix” race or ethnicity through the erasure of the difference leading to “feeling brown” or “feeling like a problem” as out of minoritarian subjects recognizing that they do indeed belong through this common experience of negative emotions.

Minoritarian subjects are socially made to feel like a problem and are driven to understand this feeling of being different as a negative existence; therefore, “feeling” is something that is introjected to the person’s psyche to fulfill a racist project of seeing minorities as “lacking” something or being incomplete subjects. Instead of minoritarian subjects attempting to erase the problem (themselves), Muñoz calls for a politics of “feeling brown”: “feeling together in difference” and “sharing the status of being a problem” to organize politically against those systems aimed at naming nonwhites as the source of the problem.¹⁵ Muñoz wishes to see “Brown” as a “concept connected to historically specific affective particularity [and] Brownness registers as a mode of affective particularity that a subject feels in herself or recognizes in others.”¹⁶ The introjection of “bad” feelings, then, is the common factor in a diverse minority group that may otherwise not have much else in common. The historical moments where we are made to feel different may in fact conduce to something generative if we understand that feelings can be redirected from the negative and into a positive investment, into a diverse group’s recognition of this affective commonality. By redirecting the introjection of feelings as something “bad” (the problem of difference), we may employ the projections of emotional responses onto a “communal investment in Brownness.”¹⁷

Brown affect offers the possibility of uniting under a value of negation, “the negation projected onto [Brownness] by a racist public sphere that devalues the particularity” of nonwhites.¹⁸ In this way, Muñoz’s project establishes the parameters for conceiving the marginalization of racialized minoritarian subjects from political belonging. This conception of sociality is a first step toward accounting for the lives of brown subjects whose social existence is deemed a problem primarily by legal parameters of citizenship. A possible next step toward understanding the social and affective fields of race is Nicholas De Genova’s work on “illegality” and the US deportation regime, which prove particularly relevant to Muñoz’s ideas on sociality: whereas the performance theorist sees minoritarian

existence as a sociocultural phenomenon, the migration scholar argues that the social field of race is ordered by legislation and governance.¹⁹ As De Genova suggests, “the real effects of laws in (re-)shaping a social field are often perfectly systematic and highly predictable,” and their treatment of undocumented migrants is particularly one-dimensional.²⁰ Since the exclusion of migrants from political belonging is determined by legislation, their experience of marginalization is constituted as a matter of the law—it is not cultural marginalization that primarily determines the parameters of the social and political alienation of migrants but, rather, their legal status that orders and confines their practices of everyday life.²¹ Clinton’s response to the law protecting refugee children evidences that the law impacts the social field and that its most devastating effects are today being felt by brown children whose human value is being scrutinized. In essence, these brown children and other deportable subjects are “feeling like a problem” in a society that constantly hails the migrant or the nonwhite as the source of threat to social, cultural, and national stability and security.

In building from Muñoz’s Brownness project and De Genova’s ideas on “illegality,” I seek to account for “illegal” migrants and their affective attachment to an experience of *Latinidad* painfully excluded from private and public belonging. The denial of state-sponsored citizenship, the legal violence against migrants, the feelings produced by these acts often carried out simultaneously against them, and the lack of public visibility of these feelings: these are a vehicle for understanding migration and the formation of transnational communities in light of government policies designed to curtail migrant lives and their freedoms. These are also central concerns for Alicia Schmidt Camacho, who argues that “the combined regime of heightened border surveillance and socioeconomic integration recast migrant subjectivity in a decidedly melancholic direction.”²² She terms these affective forms of political subjectivity as “migrant melancholia”: “an emergent mode of migrant subjectivity that contests the dehumanizing effects of authorized border crossing. . . . [M]igrants do not only mourn the deaths of conationals, or the violating injuries of theft, coerced labor, and sexual assault that can define the passage north; migrant melancholia also marks the loss of a social contract, the democratic ideal anchored in the Latin American nation-state.”²³ Migrant melancholia locates the failure of democratic social contracts in Latin American nation-states where citizens are denied the very basics of everyday life, and these are the same citizens looking for life elsewhere in the United States. However, as Clinton’s words earlier demonstrate, and as Schmidt Camacho has more recently argued, the United States has increasingly espoused a terrorizing mode of governance that also derails human and civil rights in the name of democracy.²⁴ In the case of migrants, what is

lost are the sustainable modes of citizenship that are the democratic ideals of the present, ideals that are proving to be futile and fatal both in Latin America and in the United States. For migrants to reframe melancholia vis-à-vis mourning, then, means to conceive the loss of the social contract “as full of volatile potentiality and future militancies rather than as pathologically bereft and potentially reactive.”²⁵ The continuous migrations north and the increasing number of undocumented migrants crossing the border prove that the desire for ontology and belonging does not end with the loss of democracy. Migrants also establish “other narratives of loss and wounding” to create their existence against the grain of terrorizing governance, and “[their] narration of migrant sorrows constitutes a political act, cast against the prerogatives of neoliberal development and the global division of labor, [and] in particular, the erosion of substantive citizenship and communal belonging.”²⁶ The loss of sociality and citizenship that is traded in for labor production is a deadly silence: the death of citizenship in the countries of origin and the inability of life in the country of destination extinguish the sounds of migrant voices and their world-making practices. To narrate these sounds, then, is a tactic of survival, and it is a desire for emancipation from the hands of death.

Such is the anthem sung in “Pal Norte,” the musical explosion by Calle 13, the Orishas, and Don Cheto in 2007 that hit the airwaves in the May 1 migrant rights marches. The original version of the song consisted solely of Calle 13 and Orishas and was released in early 2007 as part of Calle 13’s album *Residente o Visitante*.²⁷ A banda remix was recorded later that year, and it replaced close to half of the original song lyrics with Don Cheto’s rap.²⁸ As an example of Latino popular music, “Pal Norte” may represent one of the most recent developments in this musical category, blending traditional Mexican and Andean musical genres with beats borrowed from hip-hop, Tejano, reggaeton, and pop music. As a cultural form, however, the song represents the artists’ attempt to use their particular brands of popular music to create radical politics. Calle 13’s Residente (the lead vocalist) and Visitante are based in Puerto Rico, Don Cheto is a radio personality and part-time music artist popular predominantly in the Southwest, and the Orishas were organized in Cuba before their permanent departure from the island in 1999. The collaboration between these three very different artists aimed at using musical expression as a way of organizing people under a transnational call for migrants’ citizenship rights in a time where criminality is the order of the day:

Un nómada sin rumbo
la energía negativa yo la derrumbo
con mis pezuñas de cordero.
Me propuse a recorrer el continente entero

sin brújula, sin tiempo, sin agenda.
Inspirado por las leyendas,
por historias empaquetadas en lata,
con los cuentos que la luna relata,
aprendí a caminar sin mapa,
a irme de caminata
sin comodidades, sin lujo.
Protegido por los santos y los brujos,
aprendí a escribir cabronerías en mi libreta,
y con un mismo idioma sacudir todo el planeta.
Aprendí que mi pueblo todavía reza
porque las fucking autoridades y la puta realeza
todavía se mueven por debajo de la mesa.²⁹

Residente's voice partakes in the making of migrant imaginaries by drawing the Americas through his voice and through the stories of other migrants forced to leave their home territory and roam the hemisphere as "nomads" without proper citizenship in any nation. His words hail a subject who decides to migrate and travel the continent of the Americas on his own will and against all odds. The agency of the migrant subject is not meant to exist without the need for time, technology, and development, and he nevertheless produces an agency, a will, and a desire against the grain of capitalist modernity itself. The lyrics also hail a migratory subject who tracks the "map" of Americas by drawing the hemisphere. The migrant traveler's map, however individualistic his agency called for by Residente may be, is mediated by the "legends," "histories," and "stories" of other migrants like him who have lived the stories that are now "narrated" by the same "moon" lighting their path.

Migration, as the lyrics articulate it, is designed as a practice of everyday life and is meant to sustain life itself, rather than feed the neoliberal demands for cheap labor. The video for the original version of "Pal Norte" begins with Residente leading a group of people on the move—he is depicted as their leader and patron saint, alongside a statue of the Virgin Mary.³⁰ "With lamb hooves" and "protected by the saints and the witchdoctors," the vocalist appears on the screen at the front of the group accompanied by children carrying young white sheep in their hands. The journey begins with the migrants walking through a cemetery, in what appears to be a funeral procession with people carrying flower wreaths and crosses through isles of tombs, before moving through the rural town. As the move proceeds, more and more people join the mobilization in a ritual-like performance. They reach the highway road by the end of the first sequence, but in the next one they travel through a new town where more people are added, slowly reaching a massive proportion of migrants. By the video's closing, however, what begins as a coalition in migration becomes

a deadly path when the nomadic and migrant peoples begin to die on the road and in the border crossing itself. The first migrant to die is a young boy who drops his baby sheep when he falls on the ground—these children were at the head of the journey, symbolic of the migrant’s hope for a future, but as they arrive closer and closer to the border, that hope appears to dwindle and die. In the last scene, we see an older woman and man arrive at a border checkpoint that is patrolled by a nonidentified man carrying a radio, possibly a weapon. When they get closer to the dark figure, the couple exhaust themselves and both fall to the ground, leaving behind the statue of the Virgin Mary that originally blessed their departure.

As the migrants die, what survives the journey is the possibility and the desire for an other future: the woman and the man may exhaust themselves in the process of carrying the goddess who protects migrants in their transition from their place of origin to their destination, but their faith in her image survives multiple forms of death sponsored at the border. The video closes and the Virgin is left facing the potential Minuteman or Border Patrol agent who sits against a “Precaución” sign. On the one hand, it may be argued that the divine statue is a symbolic stand-in for the migrants themselves, replacing a physical possibility with sacred desire and therefore erasing migrant subjectivity altogether. On the other hand, her sacred signification is empty without the migrants’ psychic attachment to the image. The video has been cast in loss since its inception, which suggests that the migrants were mourning from the start of their journey, and they nonetheless continue on to a potentially more viable and liberatory future. Indeed, the statue survives to face the charges of “illegality” at the border precisely because it is invested with meaning by migrant loss, and it is the migrants themselves who produce said meaning, even in death.

The banda remix featuring Don Cheto also pairs loss and migration with death and emancipation, as does the original, but the remix begins with a different subject of address.³¹ In the original version, a young woman sings in a similar vocal register as the song’s chorus; in the remix, her voice registers on a completely different note:

Que lejos estoy del suelo donde he nacido.
Inmensa nostalgia invade mi pensamiento.
Y al verme tan sola y triste cual hoja al viento,
quisiera llorar, quisiera morir de sentimiento.³²

In contrast to the majority of the lyrics sung by Residente and Don Cheto, which entail a masculine subject in both versions of the anthem, the young woman begins the remix by vocalizing sounds of nostalgia that recall Lola Beltrán’s interpretation of “Canción mixteca,” a classic of Mexican music written by José López Alavez between 1912 and 1915.

The song and its lyrics illustrate the composer's feelings of nostalgia for his home in the state of Oaxaca, located in southwestern Mexico. Perhaps the most popular version of the song is Beltrán's, whose rendition has become a staple anthem for Mexican migrants since her recording in 1963. With Beltrán as the diva in the background and the younger singer at the forefront, the banda remix that was disseminated with the May 1st rallies begins centered on a female and indigenous genealogy of cultural forms. What is common to the male-centric original version and the feminist genealogy of the remix is the inevitable link between the desire to exist in "the land where I have been born" and the inability to do so. To lose the place of belonging reduces them to isolation and "unhappy like a leaf through the wind [that] would want to cry, [that] would want to die of sorrow." Social and state-sanctioned belonging may die with the point of departure from the place of home, but *tristeza* and *sentimiento* are expressions of the desire to not let go of what is lost. The inclusion of "Canción mixteca" into the migrant rights anthem imbues "Pal Norte"'s migrant melancholia with mourning: their sociality and citizenship die as a result of democratic states and their failure to uphold the social contract, but even as this loss is clearly understood and death is inevitable, there is a resistance to give into suicidal thoughts. The woman's voice admits to the possibility of wanting to die of sorrow, but since she does not say that she wants her physical life to end, she is caught in a web of potentiality to continue living and hoping toward a better, browner future, even in the face of "illegality."

Browning the Commons

The woman's longing for human existence besides legality remaps the social field by reorganizing sociality around the desire for a more egalitarian future. "Pal Norte" insists on creating a collective whose definitive marker is affective difference, not the national normative affect: the song breaks the legalized silence that surrounds the criminalization of Brownness and the "illegality" of the woman's voice. In doing so, it sounds out a possibility that is ultimately and untimely utopian.

For the artists and readers of PostSecret, however, perhaps no endeavor is as invested in breaking free from the oppression of silence than Frank Warren's online utopia. PostSecret began as Warren's community art project in November 2004, when he distributed three thousand self-addressed postcards throughout the streets of Washington, DC—one side blank, the other side listing instructions "invit[ing] strangers to artistically share their deepest secret on [the] postcard and mail it to [him], anonymously."³³ PostSecret began as Warren's self-help project, but it transformed into a communal investment when postcards began arriving

in his mailbox in massive numbers; to date, PostSecret has received over half a million cards, and the project's website has received over a quarter-billion hits since it went online.³⁴

Warren's project bears little resemblance to the cultural politics enunciated by the migrant rights anthem and the Dreamers Adrift video. Like the illegalities of *Brownness*, however, PostSecret aims to redirect negative affect into a positive investment in constructing communal dwellings. The potential of Warren's community art project is to create a "safe environment" where people can receive personal support by "facing their secret on [a] postcard and releasing it to a stranger."³⁵ Warren uploads ten new cards on postsecret.com every Sunday night. Sharing the most private and threatening secrets can certainly be interpreted as therapeutic and as emotional release, particularly since PostSecret is founded on Warren's belief "that each one of us has the ability to discover, share, and grow our own dark secrets into something meaningful and beautiful."³⁶ PostSecret's sense of secrecy nevertheless suggests a more complex understanding of emotions and the potentiality of their affective labor.³⁷ Expressing their secrets on the postcards allows these artists to manifest their sense of guilt as a material entity: the blank sides of the postcards are white, signifying the absence of color and meaning, but as the artists fill the empty space with words and images, they project their guilt onto it and purge negative emotions from their psyche. The postcards are now permeated with darkness, and this emotional weight is released from the artists who are free to live a life full of creative potential.

Sharing negative emotions constitutes a mode of relationality that leads to a sense of common recognition between the artists, Warren, and PostSecret's readers: the anonymous artist purges guilt and then shares it with Warren, who has offered himself as listener and receiver of their pain and suffering, and he then turns around and shares with the world via the Internet. As the meaning of postcards reaches beyond the artists, sharing secrets creates a system of social relations vis-à-vis the visuality of negative emotions, a mode of sociality "where there is no social cost for exposing a guarded secret to millions," and where those burdened with guilt can "uncover passion, experiences, hopes, regrets, and fears that have been too painful to otherwise acknowledge."³⁸ The goal of this network, according to Anne C. Fisher, a psychotherapist who has collaborated with Warren in PostSecret exhibitions, "is to make inner experience concrete by placing it outside the self," and "this exercise gives us the potential and the opportunity for self-reflection for self-acceptance, for increased understanding about the self, and for healing and personal growth."³⁹ The artist projects the negative aspects of self outward onto PostSecret's readers, and these willingly introject negative emotions out of a common sense of compassion and understanding of the other and her suffering. In

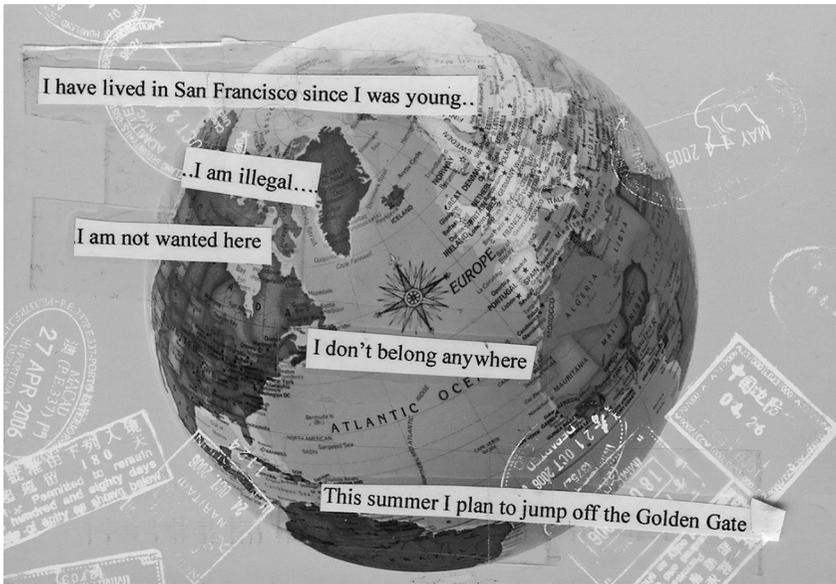


Figure 1. Anonymous postcard uploaded to postsecret.com on 6 June 2010

turn, the postcards allow the artists to remove their feelings of guilt and then project this part of themselves onto a broader public that is ready to partake in a community of self-reflection and self-acceptance.

PostSecret and its potentiality are born from the artists' projection of the self and the readers' introjection of burden. The transmission of negative affect constitutes the commons of PostSecret, a project that has created a virtual community of tolerance and acceptance where those most afflicted by dark secrets can feel a sense of belonging. Under the project's mantra, all individuals who bear the guilty weight of secrets have a place in PostSecret, whether they decide to create a postcard and confess what is keeping them from living fully, or they simply continue to visit the website looking for a temporary connection with those who have sent Warren their most intimate of dark secrets. Social media allows these guilty people to gain acceptance without judgment from those readers and artists who listen to them. In this virtual world, the individual affect is the source of communal investment in negative emotions, and this sense of relationality is a form of love that is founded on the individual offering herself up in the name of the communal.

On 6 June 2010, Warren uploaded a card (fig. 1) that tested the limits of the commons when the negative feelings of a brown "illegal" erupted onto PostSecret, and the public responses to one postcard revealed that belonging in the commons is not a universal right.⁴⁰ The card reads: "I

have lived in San Francisco since I was young . . . I am illegal . . . I am not wanted here. I don't belong anywhere. This summer I plan to jump off the Golden Gate."⁴¹ Within twenty-four hours after being posted, over twenty thousand people had joined a Facebook group called *please don't jump* that was created in response to the postcard; within seven days, membership had reached past sixty thousand.⁴² Members of *please don't jump* took to the group's profile wall to leave positive comments providing support for the suicidal artist and invited them to continue reaching for life. The group also included close to two hundred photos of people across the country relaying messages of "please don't jump" written on their hands and other parts of their bodies and on their own postcards decorated in a PostSecret style. Eventually the large number of members caused technical difficulties for the group, and it is now a Facebook page categorized as a nonprofit organization "for him/her and anyone else who feels alone."⁴³

Thousands of people answered a call for help from the "illegal" postcard's creator by leaving comments on *please don't jump*'s Facebook wall. On Sunday, 13 June 2010, a week after the card was uploaded, over nine hundred Facebook users and PostSecret readers came together on the Golden Gate Bridge for an event, "Together for Life! (Come Together on the Golden Gate Bridge)," to demonstrate their solidarity with the person who promised to jump.⁴⁴ Additionally, as a result of "tens of thousands of people around the world [having] been touched by a postcard since it was posted on www.postsecret.com," the administrators of *please don't jump* organized a benefit concert on 22 September 2010, to raise funds for San Francisco's Kristin Brooks Hope Center and its suicide prevention programming.⁴⁵ David Campos, a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and representative of San Francisco's District 9, introduced a resolution to designate 22 September as Please Don't Jump Day, in support of *please don't jump* and its antisuicide mission.⁴⁶

The suicide prevention programs, Facebook events, and the comments left on *please don't jump*'s profile wall bear witness to affective labor of PostSecret and its postcards. The card created by a brown "illegal" affected Warren himself because its sound elicited a massive response and generated numerous political projects. The sounds of the card, he said, "resonated with tens of thousands of other people rallying to keep one person from jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. . . . What an amazing combination of technology and compassion! It gives me great hope for the future of the web and the world."⁴⁷ His words identify the potentiality of this card in a different manner than the creative potential of his community art project. The PostSecret postcards that are drenched in guilt are an emotional cleansing meant to purify the cards' creators of their burden, and in doing so they create a community of acceptance in real time. In contrast, Warren understands the postcard by an "illegal" migrant as a

card that displaces guilt away from the present now and projects it toward a future full of liberatory potential. Instead of projecting affect in the name of the individual's own future life, Warren is employing the suffering of the "illegal" migrant in the service of creating "great hope for the future of the web and the world." True to PostSecret's transcendence of the individual's subjectivity, the power of the card lies in creating a sense of community at the expense its creator's life.

The transcendence of individuality for the sake of the PostSecret commons arguably ends in a positive outcome: acceptance into a communal body of PostSecret readers and artists. In the case of the "illegal" migrant, PostSecret does not end on a romantic notion of hope and humanity. Instead, the range of responses to the postcard's publicly disclosed secret of "illegality" narrate a story that is different from the message of belonging espoused by Warren, PostSecret, and most of Facebook. While the number of people who liked Warren's Facebook wall and the number of members in *please don't jump* are astonishing in quantity, their introjection of the migrant's sorrows and suicidal plans also speak to an identification with the negative emotions giving way to deathful wishes. And yet, their introjection of these negative emotions most often ignores the source of the problem that is Brownness: the migrant wants to commit suicide because they are "illegal," are "not wanted here," and they "don't belong anywhere."

The responses left by Jenny and Jean are a case in point:

JENNY: Groups like this are so important. I hate the way that depression and self harm are glorified in the media—it minimises just how desperate a person can feel, writing off their suicidal feelings as "attention seeking behavior."

JEAN: i just wanted to say that although i do not know you, and we will probably never meet, that you are special, you are unique, yes you are different but we are all different. You are a human you belong, your differences are the cause of your belonging, the only thing we all have in common really is that we are all different. please don't jump.⁴⁸

On the one hand, Jenny's and Jean's messages illustrate their identification with the migrant's feelings of not belonging and feeling unwanted; their identification is based on their common recognition that alienation and isolation because of one's individuality are things they can share as legitimate experiences. Their introjection of the migrant's emotions or the private emotions produced by the migrant's expression of "suicidal feelings" is an ability made possible by their recognition of what Jean would call their "humanity." For her, communal belonging is defined not in a plurality of sameness but in a singularity of difference: we are all the same

because we are all equally human, but we are human precisely because we are all commonly different. Recognizing a commonality between the self and the other is a key tenet of communal formations, but this recognition of similarity also runs the risk of subsuming difference into sameness, whereas Jean's response articulates a refusal to give into the impulse to propel the communal toward the erasure of difference. Her understanding of humanity catapults the commons in a more generative direction where difference itself forms the basis of recognition, not sameness.

Jenny and Jean are invested in defining humanity through a plurality of difference, and theirs is an ideology of communal belonging that runs counter to US national campaigns for equality that are not founded on difference as egalitarian, particularly the movements to defeat Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) in 2010 and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 2013. The debates over DOMA and DADT have not publicly recognized that the two paths to equal citizenship that did win the battle won precisely because they left the basis for citizenship unchallenged: we can now follow the orders of the state as we *do ask* and *do tell*, and same-sex couples can now ask permission from the federal government to legalize our forms of love. In particular, the 2010 debates over the DREAM Act and DADT evidenced that the access to normal citizenship was defined on the prerogative of achieving an equality of sameness without difference: we all want the state to recognize us as equal citizens protected and guaranteed certain rights by the same laws. After the DREAM Act was blocked by the Senate on 18 December 2010, the message was clear: undocumented youth are not allowed citizenship proper of any sort because their difference is marked on their bodies the minute they crossed the border. Unlike the military servicemen and -women who can now "out" themselves without the risk of penalty or direct removal from service, the undocumented migrant youth living under the shadow of a legally violent state cannot but continue to live in the shadows unless they risk deportation and incarceration. The undocumented migrant youth living as legally less than human in this country could not access the second-class US citizenship under DADT: even if they could access the same heteronormativity as the military servicemen and -women, they could not access second-class citizenship because they do not exist under the eyes of the state at all—the military does. Similarly, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Act (DACA) passed in 2013 when DOMA was defeated, and this legislation gives undocumented children the right to be registered as "illegal" migrants. Although DACA registration temporarily suspends their deportation proceedings, protection from removal does not change their legal status.⁴⁹ DACA does not provide a path to citizenship, but it does allow the federal government to keep track of "illegal" residents. They are all different, "we" are all human, and we are not all the same.

Jenny and Jean are able to counteract this logic of sameness without difference as a result of their encounter with a postcard from an “illegal” migrant. Their responses are an act of radical politics not because they are claiming anything directly against the state but precisely because they are theorizing a sense of communal belonging beyond a state’s rationale that inherently limits their recognition of humanity. Their hailing of the migrant as a “human” because she “[does] belong” is a marker of a civil society created politically by a migrant whose narration of their sorrows has enacted a movement. Regardless of the artist’s intention, their card sounded out a loud call for recognition from civil society, and this resonated with thousands of people across the world through social media.

On the other hand, the sounds projected through the postcard also resonated in a modality that largely ignores the systems that produce the migrant as a legal problem. The PostSecret commons is articulated strictly at the level of affective community, precisely what Warren claims is the purpose of his project: “Every secret is unique, like a fingerprint, but at a deeper level this community of confessions reveals how we are all connected by our surprising and soulful spiritual secrets. . . . For a moment you may feel less alone with a secret you might have been keeping from others, or from yourself.”⁵⁰ PostSecret is meant to create a community whose connections are drawn from the urge to feel less abandoned by the world and the desire for recognition as a member of a loving human society. This is no different with the case of the “illegal” migrant’s card because the migrant was made a part of these virtual communities of PostSecret whose readers believe in the healing powers of Warren’s project. The core problem that the postcard is addressing is not just feeling that they are unwanted or that they do not belong; it is that they are *made* unwanted and excluded from belonging as a fact of the law. The feelings of exclusion they are projecting through their postcard are expressing an unhappiness that by law cannot exist, and while Warren, Jenny, and Jean are indeed the intended audience of the postcard, responses like theirs do not make mention of the legal roots of the migrant’s impending suicide. In their sincere hopes that the migrant is still alive, these Facebook members and PostSecret readers prove deaf to the sounds of “illegality” whose livelihood is continuously under encroachment by the state, and they are deaf to the possibilities of creating a sociality that exists despite terrorizing governance. They do not listen to their brown sounds that seek to uphold the social contract and refuse the failure of legislation to make it possible for their migrant sorrows to belong not in an anonymous community but within a different one.

In Defense of Migration

The responses echoing the message of *please don't jump*—"I also wanted to jump off two years ago but I'm glad I didn't because things are now much better"—do not imagine that for the migrant "it gets better" exists with an expiration date: migrant belonging is constantly under the threat of deportation and incarceration.⁵¹ Belonging for undocumented migrants is a thoroughly ephemeral condition, and things are not getting better. If the answer to the question, what does it feel like to be a problem?, is what Muñoz seeks to pose as the foundation for a positive investment in Brownness, the creator of the postcard rejects Brownness because the negative feelings that they introject and then project through their postcard are *not* addressed to the future of a movement. The postcard is clear: "this summer I plan to jump off the Golden Gate [Bridge]," and there will be no future for them because they are legally made "illegal."

My purpose here is not to devalue the virtual and physical communities created as a result of this postcard—that it has led so many thousands of Facebook members to come together and form this community more than speaks to the potential of social movements created from "illegal" narratives of loss. However limited they are in their scope of legality, the responses to the postcard do express a belief in making things better for migrants. Their hopes are generated by the negative affect projected from the suicidal thoughts of a migrant postcard, and they respond to the brown sounds of "illegality" by desiring to change the world that produces their human sadness, even if not their "illegal" ones. The responses to the PostSecret card echo the questions that propel the Brownness of Calle 13, the Orishas, and Don Cheto to theorize social change in a liberatory mode. "Pal Norte" narrates the lives of migrants that are unsanctioned by an oppressive regime of law, and the vocalists hold government states accountable for the loss of citizenship and belonging. Don Cheto's rap is most adamant about critiquing the state for its failure to uphold the social contract: "La autoridad perdió credibilidad, no terminan las mordidas y sigue la impunidad. La vida de ilegal es vivir en el infierno, pero yo me vine al norte por culpa del gobierno."⁵² The card by an anonymous undocumented brown artist unknowingly echoes Don Cheto's sounds and their mandate to hold the Mexican and the US states accountable for their collusion in rendering human life "illegal" and an aberration of democracy: the card, too, sparked a massive movement to save the artist's life, and while the terror of the law proves to limit the imaginary of civil society, the commons created from the sorrows and suicidal thoughts of an "illegal" citizen-subject nevertheless hails undocumented lives as worthy of political ontology.

My intent is to push the commons and its affective communities to recognize and manifest the possibilities for this migrant and their brown sorrows to exist within a different sense of belonging, one that urges the state to recognize a community that can no longer exist in anonymity. To echo Yosimar Reyes and Julio Salgado, the illegalities of Brownness are hopes for a future where brown lives can register affectively and are not just deemed worthy of human status under legality. The Facebook posts and responses to PostSecret insist that the migrant does indeed belong because their expression of negative emotions makes them human, even if the state relegates their existence to infrahuman status. Produced in response to a migrant's sorrows, their negative affect manifests a massive recognition of humanity that is contra statist mentality and also a political act in its own right. While the sounds of "illegality" went unheard when brown feelings emerged onto the scene of the commons, "Pal Norte" and *The Legalities of Being* do articulate a sense of the commons where "illegal" affliction-cum-belonging is not an act of death. For these artists and their cultural forms, migrant melancholia is a mode of creating brown life amidst a racially violent state, whereas PostSecret and the commons did not sense the afflictions of the "illegal," and they proved deaf to the sounds of Brownness. The missing link is that which allows both Brownness and these affective communities to reach beyond the limits of civil society and radically alter the law that renders migrant livelihood an impossible life. #Not1More.

Notes

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2. Alan Gomez, "Obama Asks Congress for \$3.7 Billion to Deal with Border Crisis," *USA Today*, 9 July 2014, www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/07/08/obama-border-immigration-congress-funding-request/12352771/.

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 6. Dreamers Adrift, “About Us,” dreamersadrift.com/about (accessed 13 January 2015).
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 9. José Esteban Muñoz, “‘Chico, What Does It Feel Like to Be a Problem?’: The Transmission of Brownness,” in *A Companion to Latino Studies*, ed. Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 441–51.
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 12. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 12.
 13. Muñoz, “Feeling Brown,” 68.
 14. Muñoz, “Chico,” 441.
 15. *Ibid.*, 444.
 16. *Ibid.*
 17. *Ibid.*, 445.
 18. *Ibid.*
 19. Nicholas De Genova, “The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement,” in *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*, ed. Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 33–65.
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 22. Alicia Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the US-Mexico Borderlands* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 287.
 23. *Ibid.*, 286.
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 26. Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries*, 287–88.

27. Calle 13, *Residente o Visitante* (Sony US Latin, 2007).
28. Ayala Ben-Yehuda, "Calle 13, Don Cheto Team for Banda Remix," *Billboard*, 28 November 2007, www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/1316336/calle-13-don-cheto-team-for-banda-remix.
29. "I crack negative energy with my lamb hooves. I decided to travel the entire continent, without a compass, without time, without a plan. Inspired by the legends, by the stories wrapped in cans, with the stories that the moon tells, I learned to walk without a map, to go on a tiring trek, without comforts, without luxuries. Protected by the saints and the witchdoctors, I learned to write curse words in my notebook, and with the same language shake the entire planet. I learned that my people still pray because the fucking authorities and the motherfucking rich people are still moving under the table." All translations are my own.
30. The video is available on YouTube, uploaded by Calle13VEVO, 24 October 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBYO1ZfxxSM.
31. The banda remix of "Pal Norte" was made available online through various social media outlets in 2007, and it was officially released on Don Cheto's album *La Crisis* (Morena Music, 2010).
32. "How far am I from the land where I have been born. An immense nostalgia invades my thinking. And upon seeing myself so alone and unhappy like a leaf through the wind, I would want to cry, I would want to die of sorrow."
33. Frank Warren, foreword, to *PostSecret: Confessions on Life, Death, and God* (New York: William Morrow, 2009), 1.
34. Frank Warren, "Half a Million Secrets," TED, April 2012, www.ted.com/talks/frank_warren_half_a_million_secrets/transcript?language=en.
35. Frank Warren, introduction to *The Secret Lives of Men and Women: A Post-Secret Book* (New York: William Morrow, 2007), n.p.
36. Frank Warren, *PostSecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives* (New York: ReganBooks, 2005), 3.
37. Anna Poletti, "Intimate Economies: PostSecret and the Affect of Confession," *Biography* 34, no. 1 (2011): 25–36.
38. Warren, introduction to *Secret Lives*.
39. Anne C. Fisher, foreword to in Warren, *Extraordinary Confessions*, viii–ix.
40. The postcard's creator has never been identified, and therefore it is not possible to know the artist's gender or racial or ethnic identity. To respect the artist's choice to continue in anonymity, I use the plural pronoun "they"/"them" to refer to them throughout the rest of the article. I address them as "brown" on the grounds that the law renders them as an "illegal" foreigner and therefore nonwhite as the US racial schema racializes them.
41. PostSecret, www.postsecret.com (accessed 13 January 2015).
42. Kristi Oloffson, "PostSecret Suicide Confession Starts an Offline Movement," *Time*, 15 June 2010, www.newsfeed.time.com/2010/06/15/postsecret-suicide-confession-starts-an-offline-movement/.
43. Comments and images were allowed to be uploaded under the Facebook profile for the *please don't jump* group, which is now a closed group (www.facebook.com/groups/119460778095373, accessed 13 January 2015). Although the group is now closed, a second profile for the *please don't jump* fan page was created and currently boasts over twenty-four thousand members, www.facebook.com/please-donotjump (accessed 13 January 2015).
44. "Together for Life! (Come Together on the Golden Gate Bridge)," Facebook, 13 June 2010, www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=134344396576414/ (accessed 13 January 2015).

45. “Please Don’t Jump—Blue October Acoustics Act/Awareness Event,” Facebook, 22 September 2010, www.facebook.com/pleasedonotjump#!/event.php?eid=142364815803058 (accessed 4 March 2014).

46. Joshua Sabatini, “Supervisor Introduces Resolution to Designate ‘Please Don’t Jump Day,’” *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 September 2010, www.sfexaminer.com/sanfrancisco/supervisor-introduces-resolution-to-designate-please-dont-jump-day/Content?oid=2160705.

47. Warren, quoted in “PostSecret and Facebook Unite to Save Life,” *San Francisco Examiner*, 8 June 2010, sfist.com/2010/06/08/people_unite_to_save_life.php.

48. “Jenny” and “Jean” are pseudonyms for two Facebook users who commented on PostSecret’s Facebook wall in response to the postcard. I have included their comments as they appeared, in unedited form, www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=119460778095373&v=wall (page inactive, accessed 4 March 2011).

49. US Department of Homeland Security, *Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals* (DACA), www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/consideration-deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca (accessed 13 January 2015).

50. Warren, *Confessions*, 275.

51. This is the first comment response left on the postsecret.com website after Warren uploaded the postcard.

52. “The state authority [has] lost all credibility, the bribes haven’t ended and impunity [still] continues. Living as an illegal means living in hell, but it is the government’s fault that I came to el norte.”