

Words as Borders, Words as Actions, Actions as Process
by an Asian illegal alien

When I was younger, I used to try to play with the words “illegal alien” because they would prick me deep, it made me feel non-human. It made me play dumb, “I’m an illegal alien from outer space.” It made me think up justifications against my illegality, “I’m not a criminal. You see, I arrived on a visa that eventually expired, and that’s a civil violation at best.” It justified me, but didn’t give much compassion to others who committed a “crime,” nor did it address the criminality imposed on oppressed nationalities under white supremacy.

James Yaki Sayles says *On Transforming the Colonial and “Criminal” Mentality* in his book *Mediations on Frantz Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth*:

Aponte’s previous violations of the colonialist state’s law were violations of an individual, for personal gain. But more important, they were seen even by him at that stage as true “violations of law” because the “law” and the state that it upheld were still recognized by Aponte as being legitimate. He was a “criminal” because he still saw himself as a “criminal” within the definition and the practice of colonialist oppression. This is an aspect of the “criminal” and the colonial mentality: continued recognition and acceptance of legitimacy of colonial rule; to continue to feel that the colonial state has a right to rule over the colonized.

Thus, part of my praxis has been about learning to recognize and reject legitimacy of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist hetero-patriarchal rule. What is it to be “undocumented?” It is a legal construct written on paper that has defined the condition of certain people in order to regulate them. To accept being “undocumented,” to be “undocumented and unafraid,” is a rejection of this dehumanization, but it still brings to question: is it worthwhile to identify as a piece of text? Or is that just as dehumanizing? The words “illegal,” “unauthorized,” and “undocumented” all imply that there are then those with legality, authorization, documents. They are ill-defining words that have been imposed in order to put people in a position of invalidation and a place without power. I feel that I can now use the words “illegal alien” with ease because I’ve rejected the legitimacy of them; perhaps, I am a “criminal” or “illegal” when considered by U.S. law, but what of it when I don’t accept the legitimacy of the U.S. government? I’m still in the process of considering terms that don’t attempt to function to dis-empower migrants, something in the realm of “sovereign migrant” or “oppressed transnational.”

Even though it isn't an entirely satisfactory term, I tenuously call myself an “unauthorized immigrant” for the sake of convenience. I find the more widely-used term “undocumented immigrant” to be even less satisfactory as it alludes a shallow analysis of migration, and thus, leads to an advocacy for migrants that is just as depthless. Migration doesn’t occur in a vacuum. It’s one of the direct effects of U.S. imperialism, but that understanding is very rarely discussed by immigration advocacy groups. This is due to a heavy focus on a supposedly monolithic struggle of the “undocumented.” When you try to address a mythical group of the “undocumented,” you can only really focus on trying to “document the undocumented.” It becomes about earning documents, which is apolitical and pacified, as if one could accidentally lose one’s documents on the train and become undocumented. The purported solution to undocumented or unauthorized immigration is then ‘legalization.’

Advocating for legalization, I argue, is really advocacy for the further legitimization of U.S. citizenship and whiteness, and is not actual advocacy for migrants. There is a very limited symbolic fight for the relief of the physical and economic restrictions that are unique to unauthorized immigrants, such as stopping deportations, and earning access to education and healthcare. However, a more dominating narrative is one that considers unauthorized immigrants as not deserving of basic human necessities until they earn access to the status of citizenship, and thus, earning the possibility

of a minute kind of humanization and mobility. Essentially, migrants aren't considered worthy of basic human dignity without the authorization of the U.S. government. And we must note, the notion of U.S. citizenship is historically linked to whiteness.

I'm then brought to the word "unauthorized." I prefer the word "unauthorized" as it implies something deeper; it implies an exchange of power. Who is unauthorized, who is authorized, and who has the authority to issue that authorization? It would be popular conclusion to consider that the U.S. government has the authority to issue that authorization, which is problematic when you consider settler colonialism. These distinctions of being a citizen, legal resident, visa holder, or unauthorized immigrant are based on distinctions of authorization set by the settler-colonialist government. The acceptance of these distinctions can be considered a small act of participation in viewing the authority of the U.S as more legitimate than the authority of the Indigenous peoples of these lands.

I'm not saying that people should renounce their U.S. citizenship, as I don't know to what benefit that would be, but contextually, the valuation of being considered here "legally" ignores that we're all participatory to various extents in ongoing settler colonialism. And in my understanding, Indigenous peoples can be in a difficult situation in which they're either implicated with racists who don't want oppressed nationalities migrating here or with pro-migrant people despite a lack of serious consideration to the ongoing colonization that they're facing. Their struggles are usually only made visible as a punch line to an immigration joke.

I've used the word "earn" several times, that people are expected to "earn" access. This is to allude to an on-going trend in the current "immigration movement," which is maintained by reform-centered organizations, that holds its strength in treating everybody as "model-minorities." There's the federal DREAM Act, which would give a pathway to citizenship for young people who dedicate their time to college or the military for a given number of years. The frequent argument for the DREAM Act is that the beneficiaries would be young, assimilated, brought to the U.S. at a young age with no knowledge or accountability, "Americans" for all intents and purposes, and willing to be upwardly mobile. The potential beneficiaries of the DREAM Act call themselves DREAMers.

A problem I have with nomenclature, the naming of things, is that it can lead to a process of exclusion. Once a group is formed and authenticated, it then creates an excluded group of the inauthentic. DREAMers have taken up the mantle, unconsciously or not, as the model minority among unauthorized immigrants; they're the most deserving of the deserving. This, unfortunately, fuels the fire against other unauthorized immigrants who may not be young, not culturally American, did have knowledge and accountability in coming to the U.S., or can't be upwardly mobile for a variety of reasons.

This similar narrative is also applied to day laborers. They are considered doing the jobs that nobody else is willing to do, and deserve to be in the U.S. for their hard work. Then, there are legal immigrants who are against immigration reform because they've earned their legality by working hard to do everything the proper way, and "all of these illegals should do everything the right way like I did, and get in the back of the line." This narrative of attempting to play to people's sympathies and to their capitalistic notions of value creates divisive stratification. There is also no criticality around, for instance, how detrimental the white construction of "upward mobility" and assimilation has been to oppressed communities, and of how people with disabilities have the right to not work and contribute only what they are able.

The division delves deeper than just civic considerations when the racial context is considered. When Indigenous peoples are either invisible or a punch line, and when non-Black oppressed nationalities maintain a narrative that asserts that they deserve to be in the U.S. due to their work ethic, well, compared to whom? There's an implicit anti-Black sentiment to this mainstream immigration narrative, in which Black people are left to be considered as not working hard enough to deserve to be present in the U.S. Further, when global anti-Blackness is perpetuated by the First World, when Black people are not considered human beings, what does it mean it to consider oneself a human being and to fight for "migrant rights as human rights?" Non-Black oppressed nationalities must be mindful of the ways they have positioned themselves, without critical thought, against Blackness.

So, if the current narrative for immigration advocacy is not necessarily advocacy for migrant rights, it's divisive, it's anti-Black, it doesn't recognize Indigenous sovereignty, and it's not conducive to any transformative change, then what can be done? As the organizing for migrant rights is currently dominated by reform-oriented groups, there has to be more mobilization with a radical understanding of migration. We need to develop different frameworks on how migration should be addressed.

In my opinion, radical narrative for migrant rights should focus on de-legitimizing the "authority" of the U.S., especially by being active allies to Indigenous peoples and communities. Also, I believe we should start looking at migration as a community issue. Regardless of whether or not one is present in the U.S. with authorization, the issue of migration is still part of your struggle. The control of migration to and within the U.S. has a long history of being used as a tool of repression against oppressed nationalities. U.S. imperialism and colonialism triggers certain migratory patterns. Then, the U.S. immigration system is utilized as a method by the state in trying to cope with migrants as surplus populations. There is no mythical neighborhood of unauthorized immigrants that ICE goes to raid; they raid communities of oppressed nationalities. Like the Prison Industrial Complex, the immigration system is being used to criminalize, regulate, and imprison oppressed nationalities for population control and profit. Thus, as the Prison Industrial Complex and the Immigration Industrial Complex are both tools of regulation used concurrently against oppressed nationalities, mobilization against both also has to go hand-in-hand.

Additionally, there have to be efforts towards decolonizing love and our relation to emotions, mind, and body. Theoretically speaking, family functions as the smallest form of the state. Mothers are, unfortunately, agents of the state in how they're used to put forth the narratives of the state through the regulation of their children, the future population. This is one of the reasons why patriarchal violence is insistently enacted against women of oppressed nationalities and their bodies. Historically, the existence of families, friendships, relationships are of inconvenience to the U.S. and their regulation of oppressed nationalities. The narratives of families who are separated by imprisonment and deportation are made invisible because this kind of humanization is of no benefit to the state.

Thus, love itself is a process of rebellion against the dehumanization of our oppression. The process of self-love as oppressed peoples means denying everything that has been taught to us; to hate and be distrustful of ourselves, our bodies, and our peoples. As Audre Lorde said, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." I'd like to end with some definitions of *Han*, a Korean cultural concept of collective oppression. I do so in hopes that defining ways that conditions and illness are manifested as interconnected among emotions, mind, and body may be able to then manifest different and holistic methods of approaching and decolonizing wellness and love:

We...were born from the womb of *Han* and brought up in the womb of *Han*.

Han is sorrow caused by heavy suffering, injustice or persecution, a dull lingering ache in the soul. It is a blend of lifelong sorrow and resentment, neither more powerful than the other. *Han* is imbued with resignation, bitter acceptance and a grim determination to wait until vengeance can at last be achieved.

Han is passive. It yearns for vengeance, but does not seek it. *Han* is held close to the heart, hoping and patient but never aggressive. It becomes part of the blood and breath of a person. There is a sense of lamentation and even of reproach toward the destiny that led to such misery.

Someone who dies of *han* is said to have died of *hwabyeong*.