

# Present Tense

A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

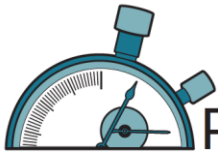
## Acceptable Heterogeneity: Brownwashing Rhetoric in President Obama's Address on Immigration

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# Acceptable Heterogeneity: Brownwashing Rhetoric in President Obama's Address on Immigration

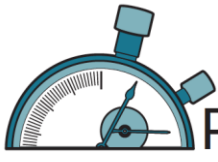
Ana Milena Ribero

In his controversial address on immigration delivered on November 20, 2014, President Barack Obama explained his plan to "help make our immigration system more fair and more just" with an executive action, currently under temporary injunction, that could provide deportation deferment and work permits to some 3.9 million people living in the US undocumented (Krogstad and Passel). A close examination of this seemingly historic announcement, however, unveils the troubling logic at play in Obama's claims of inclusion. In this essay, I analyze Obama's address on immigration to argue that its "migrant-friendly" rhetoric is used to placate liberal allies, garner the Latin@ vote, and posit a humane national image, while it disguises continued discriminatory tactics against racialized undocumented migrants. Drawing on the notion of "pinkwashing," I offer the term "brownwashing"—a rhetorical strategy with which the Obama administration proposes to include acceptable forms of heterogeneity into the US national imaginary, while hiding its promotion of policies and discourses that maintain discrimination against Latin American undocumented migrants.

Through the rhetoric of brownwashing, the Obama administration embraces heterogeneity by including acceptable and exceptional

migrants into US civic life, while it increases the criminalization, detention, and deportation of low-income Latin American migrants and, therefore, reproduces the racialized, sexualized, and classed homogeneity of the nation. Obama's address on immigration demonstrates how brownwashing appeals to heterogeneity in order to (1) create an exceptionalist binary that compares "good migrants" to "bad migrants;" (2) maintain the subordinate position of Latin@s in the US; (3) disguise US history of discrimination against migrants of color; and (4) conceal the racialized violence of border securitization, thus maintaining a positive national image.

The rhetoric of brownwashing parallels what Queer Studies scholars have referred to as pinkwashing—the rhetorical strategy of saturating political and commercial discourse with support for a popular social cause (e.g., gay rights) while maintaining practices and politics antithetical to the supposedly supported cause. As an analytic, pinkwashing has gained traction in critiques of how Israel's gay-friendly image disguises human rights violations of settler colonialism behind the appearance of equality.<sup>1</sup> Similar to pinkwashing, what I'm calling brownwashing is a nationalist rhetorical strategy that cleanses the image of a discriminatory state through the inclusion of acceptable forms of heterogeneity. The rhetoric of brownwashing



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employs appeals to difference as a mechanism of homogeneity. As Judith Butler argues, "To produce the nation that serves as the basis for the nation-state, that nation must be purified of its heterogeneity except in those cases where a certain pluralism allows for the reproduction of homogeneity on another basis" (32). The nation rejects heterogeneity yet maintains a rhetoric of tolerance and inclusivity. The inclusion of acceptable heterogeneity, however, does not trouble the homogeneity of the state because it disguises exclusionary politics as equality and pluralism.

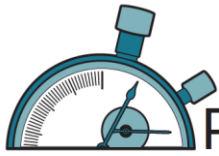
## **The Good Migrant/Bad Migrant Binary**

The foundational trope of the rhetoric of brownwashing is the good migrant/bad migrant binary in which certain migrants are positioned as acceptable to the state and deserving of its protection while others are read as threats to the nation and, therefore, undeserving. This binary logic is evident when Obama pledges to prioritize the deportation of "actual threats to our security. Felons, not families. Criminals, not children. Gang members, not a mom who's working hard to provide for her kids." Through the frame of the good migrant, which Obama specifically names as working parents and their children, the rhetoric of brownwashing presents the exceptional migrant body as evidence of the nation's inclusivity. The good migrant can, according to Obama, "come out of the shadows and get right with the law" if she fits certain stipulations. Obama continues, "If you've been in America for more than five years; if you have children who are American citizens or legal residents; if you register, pass a criminal background check, and you're willing to pay your fair share of taxes—you'll be able to apply to stay in this country temporarily without fear of deportation." Thus, the acceptable good

migrant can attest to the inclusivity of the nation, despite the strict boundaries placed on that inclusion. High-skilled workers with professional degrees and higher socioeconomic statuses are also legitimated as good migrants by Obama's brownwashing rhetoric: "I'll make it easier and faster for high-skilled immigrants, graduates, and entrepreneurs to stay and contribute to our economy, as so many business leaders have proposed." With such statements, Obama defines the neoliberal good migrant that embodies acceptable heterogeneity and may be included in the nation-state.

Still, as Jasbir Puar notes, "The protection of life granted through national belonging is a precarious invitation at best" (10). The good migrant/bad migrant binary of brownwashing rhetoric is a volatile construction in which Latin American migrants can never be sure of what side of the binary they occupy as they are subjected to the changing policies of an ambivalent US government. For example, the young undocumented people popularly known as DREAMers<sup>2</sup> were once thought of as good migrants who could be included in the nation-state through the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act of 2001. However, despite bipartisan support, the DREAM Act continues to stall in Congress, illustrating how even those who were once thought of as good migrants can lose their footing and cross to the other side of the binary.

The rhetorical inclusion of the good migrant brownwashes the nation's image, while racialized, gendered, and sexualized migrants suffer the dehumanizing consequences of ever-harsher policies and practices. Despite the Obama administration's inclusion of acceptable heterogeneity through programs like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA),<sup>3</sup>



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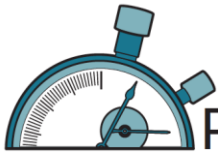
undocumented US residents are being detained in dehumanizing and life-threatening conditions.<sup>4</sup> Humiliating tactics of surveillance, including making Central American asylum seekers wear bulky ankle bracelets, are being newly implemented. And most recently, in a moment demonstrative of the paradoxes implicit in the rhetoric of brownwashing, Obama had transgender woman Jennicet Gutiérrez removed during the White House's Gay Pride celebration when she interrupted the president asking him to release LGBTQ migrants from detention.<sup>5</sup> While Obama promotes his gay- and migrant-friendly politics, Gutiérrez and the LGBTQ migrants for whom she advocates remain excluded—the bad migrants hidden beneath the pluralist image of the nation.

### **"Differential Inclusion" and The Tropes of Brownwashing Rhetoric**

Obama's proposal for immigration reform creates a brownwashed *ethos* for the Democratic party that might help them to garner the coveted Latin@ vote. Yet, the brownwashing rhetoric he employs maintains the subordinate position of Latin@s in the US by proposing that Latin@s and Latin American migrants are only acceptable as low-skilled workers and subservient to non-migrant US Americans. Ethnic studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu defines this positioning as "differential inclusion... the process whereby a group of people is deemed integral to the nation's economy, culture, identity, and power—but integral only or precisely because of their designated subordinated standing" (47). In a question that underscores this rhetorical move, Obama asks, "Are we a nation that tolerates the hypocrisy of a system where workers who pick our fruit and make our beds never have a chance to get right with the law?" With this

question, Obama reinforces dominant narratives about Latin@s and Latin American migrants as menial laborers. Latin@s and Latin American migrants are included in the civic imaginary, worthy of state protection, but only in a position that often comes with inhumane working conditions, low wages, and lack of political power.

Furthermore, the acceptable Latin American migrant—whose acceptability is stipulated by the state and, therefore, ever changing—eclipses histories of racialized violence and discrimination in the US's encounter of the Other. While in his address Obama concedes that people have been migrating to the Western hemisphere for hundreds of years, he overlooks the fact that this migration was first and foremost an act of colonization and settlement of lands already occupied. Obama's states, "For more than 200 years, our tradition of welcoming immigrants from around the world has given us a tremendous advantage over other nations...It has shaped our character as a people...not trapped by our past, but able to remake ourselves as we choose." While evoking the heterogeneous roots of the nation, this statement fails to acknowledge that the US's immigration policies have historically been dictated by racialized, gendered, and sexualized discrimination. The Chinese Exclusionary Act of 1882 is but one example of how migration was restricted by race. In addition, LGBTQ migrants were prohibited from legally entering the US until the passage of the Immigration Act of 1990, as were HIV positive migrants until January 2010 when the Department of Health and Human Services removed HIV from the list of diseases that would make migrants inadmissible to the US ("HIV"). The US's migrant history is built on notions of acceptable heterogeneity that posit European and



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heteronormative migration as a source of pride in the origin story of the nation. The sinister underbelly of this supposedly advantageous migration is silenced by the clamor of nationalist pride.

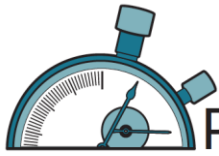
What's more, the rhetoric of brownwashing not only disguises the racialized violence of the US's migrant history, but also obscures the violence of current practices of border securitization. In his address, Obama mentions with pride his administration's efforts to secure the border through increased militarization, "Today we have more agents and technology deployed to secure our southern border than at any time in our history." He then discusses his plans to continue increasing the amount of resources and personnel necessary for the mechanisms of apprehension, detention, and deportation of undocumented crossers, "We'll build on our progress at the border with additional resources for our law enforcement personnel so that they can stem the flow of illegal crossings and speed the return of those who do cross over." To effect the logic of acceptable heterogeneity, a migrant-friendly stance must always be juxtaposed to border securitization that keeps out those deemed unacceptable. When Obama refers to the decrease in "illegal border crossings" during his administration and to the fact that "the number of [unaccompanied Central American] children is actually lower than it's been in nearly two years," he fails to mention that children and adults are still fleeing northbound from Central America because of poverty and violence. The decrease in unaccompanied minors arriving at the US's door is due to the decision by the US and Mexico to make their borders tighter. In fact, motivated by the so-called crisis of unaccompanied Central American minors crossing the US/Mexico border without legal documentation, Obama has

worked with Mexican leaders to increase patrolling of Mexico's southern border and strengthen security on *La Bestia*, the infamous train that provides a dangerous yet popular mode of transportation for desperate migrants crossing Mexico (Sink). Yet, little attention is paid to the poverty experienced by many migrants who risk everything they have, including their lives, to migrate north.<sup>6</sup> Little attention is paid to well-documented causes of northbound migration: the trade agreements including the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Central American Free Trade Agreement that bring about destitution to many Central American regions; the US illicit drug market that creates a violent trade line through Central America; and the US's deportation policies that exacerbate criminal gang presence in the region. In other words, brownwashing understates the idea that as a hemispheric power, the US is implicated in global migration patterns and that in securing the border the country is complicit in the precarious lives of racialized migrants.

## Conclusion

In the context of Obama's speech on immigration, brownwashing rhetoric reveals how acceptable heterogeneous subjects are complicit in homogenous nationalist formations rather than inherently or automatically excluded from or opposed to them. My goal in analyzing Obama's use of brownwashing is not to reject the notion that programs like DACA have eased the lives of some undocumented Latin@s in the US. In fact, a report by the American Immigration Council found that 59% of DACA beneficiaries obtained a new job and 45% increased job earnings after acquiring DACA (Gonzales and Bautista-Chavez).<sup>7</sup> And while these changes perhaps pale in comparison to





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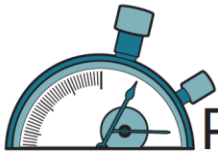
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the decreased anxiety that DACA recipients may experience when they no longer have to worry about their deportation, the program still masks the continued state-sanctioned precarity that undocumented migrants experience in the US. For example, while DACA recipients may not worry about their own deportation, their parents are still at risk of detention and deportation.

Brownwashing feeds narratives of US exceptionalism, presenting the US as a bastion of color-blind safety, freedom, and economic mobility while hiding the persistent mistreatment of undocumented migrants of color. Even though Obama's address on immigration presents an illustrative example, brownwashing rhetoric is ubiquitous in dominant political discourses about immigration reform. As the 2016 presidential election looms on the horizon, brownwashing will play a role in the ways candidates on both sides of the aisle engage with the issue of immigration.<sup>8</sup> Rhetorical critics and conscious citizens should be wary of the sort of rhetoric that uses the banner of inclusion and heterogeneity to hide racialized oppression.

### Endnotes

1. See Schulman (2011 and 2012) and Lubitow and Davis (2011) for more on pinkwashing and its implications.
2. The label DREAMer is commonly used to refer to young undocumented people who were brought to the US by their parents as children and who were offered a path toward legalization through the DREAM Act.
3. See Gonzales, Terriquez, and Ruszczyk for an analysis of DACA's effects on undocumented young people in the US.
4. The Eloy Detention Center, a 1596-bed migrant detention facility owned by Corrections Corporation of America, has long been the site of allegations of inhumane treatment and negligence against its inmates. During the summer of 2015, approximately 200 of those being held at Eloy participated in a hunger strike to protest inhumane and abusive conditions, including inadequate mental and medical care, lack of access to legal resources, and the exploitation of detainee's work. The hunger strike was sparked by the mysterious deaths while in custody of José de Jesús Deniz-Sahagun and another inmate whose identity remains unknown (Taracena).
5. The ACLU reports that LGBTQ migrants detained by the Department of Homeland Security face disproportionate levels of violence and sexual abuse while in custody, and that prolonged isolation for LGBTQ migrants in "protective custody" is common practice in migrant detention centers (*In Their Own Words*).
6. In *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*, Salvadoran journalist Oscar Martinez details the harrowing journey that Central American migrants take as they ride atop a cargo train,



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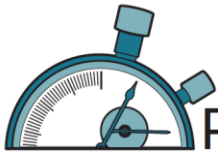
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literally hanging on for dear life as they make their way across Mexico.

7. Gonzales et al. propose that undocumented young people with higher levels of education and better access to community resources benefit the most from DACA ("Becoming DACAmended"). Their findings support my thesis that brownwashing rhetoric is at play in most if not all forms of immigration reform.
8. During the summer of 2015, global audiences saw undocumented immigration gain the attention of mainstream political discourse in the US through Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump's inflammatory rhetoric about Mexican migrants. Interestingly, Trump illustrates a rhetorical move away from discourses of equality and diversity and toward overt exclusionary nationalist discourses. It will be interesting to see how other presidential candidates approach the issue of immigration, considering the emotions—both in support and in condemnation—that Trump's rhetoric has elicited.

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