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INTIMATE ECONOMIES: POSTSECRET AND THE AFFECT OF CONFESSION

ANNA POLETTI

An intimate public is an achievement . . . it flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline and discussion about how to live.

Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* viii

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that the truth, lodged in our most secret nature, “demands” only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation.

Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge* 60

In 2004, Frank Warren invited people to write a secret that “is true and you have never shared” on a postcard and mail it to him at a street address in Germantown, Maryland, USA. Participants were encouraged to “let the postcard be your canvas,” and were invited to “see a secret” by visiting the project website, a blog where scans of recently received cards were uploaded weekly (www.postsecret.com). *PostSecret* was conceived as an art project, and began with a batch of 3,000 custom-made cards which Warren distributed by leaving them in art galleries and in library books, and by handing them out at subway stations. While the original stock of cards was exhausted in three weeks, Warren continued to receive handmade cards at the mailing address (Warren 1). Six years later he continues to receive cards in the mail every week. He has amassed a collection of over 150,000 cards (*PostSecret*), and HarperCollins

has published five hardcover books showcasing secrets Warren has received. The project also has a strong online presence, with Warren still updating the project blog weekly with scans of recently received cards. There is also a Facebook page for the project, a Twitter account that Warren uses to publicize the project, and a website called the *PostSecret Community* where people can share secrets by uploading videos, get information on Warren's *PostSecret* speaking tours, which regularly visit US high schools and university campuses, and "become a supporting member" of the community by purchasing a *PostSecret* book via Amazon.

In this article I use Berlant's theory of the intimate public as a means of thinking about *PostSecret* and its publication of confession across a number of media. I will examine *PostSecret* as an intimate public constituted by micro life narratives presented on single postcards brought together to form a meta narrative about secrets and the need to share them. I am particularly interested in how the project uses the interplay of the material and the virtual for the purposes of life narrative and public building, and suggest that this can tell us a lot about the ongoing importance of the material in the virtual social and narrative spaces created online. My analysis picks up on two elements of Berlant's formulation and critique of the role of intimate publics in the formation of citizenship in the US: her analysis of the shift in the organization of publics as spaces of consumption, and the rise of the importance of affective identification as the key to participation in publics. Unfortunately there is not enough space in this article to link these components of the critique to Berlant's incisive analysis of the effects these changes have on the conceptualization and practice of citizenship, the "life" that binds individuals together as citizens, and the role the documents of intimate publics have in defining it, or the ramifications this has for political activity (see "Introduction"). Instead, I pick up on Berlant's interest in "the kinetics of aesthetic form . . . [as] a way to open up an analysis of the mechanisms that enable the reproduction of normativity not as a political program, but as a structure of feeling, and as an affect" (*Female* 266). I argue that this approach has considerable potential to inform our analysis of the uses of autobiography in contemporary culture, and of the economies that circulate it.

Reading *PostSecret* as an intimate public opens up the possibility of examining the continued influence of confession on a variety of popular autobiographical modes. The knowledge-power formation of confession mapped by Foucault, however, where subjects confessed to an individual who had the power to heal them by hearing the truth, has undergone a kind of democratization. I argue here that the members of the intimate public of *PostSecret* "hear" each others' confessions, and confess themselves, to gain access to an

SHARE A SECRET?

You are invited to anonymously contribute a secret to a group art project. Your secret can be a regret, fear, betrayal, desire, confession or childhood humiliation. Reveal *anything* - as long as it is true and you have never shared it with anyone before.

Steps:
 Take a postcard, or two.
 Tell your secret anonymously.
 Stamp and mail the postcard.

Tips:
 Be brief – the fewer words used the better.
 Be legible – use big, clear and bold lettering.
 Be creative – let the postcard be your canvas.

SEE A SECRET.
www.postsecret.com

place
postage
here

PostSecret
 13345 Copper Ridge Rd
 Germantown, Maryland
 20874

Figure 1: The invitation to contribute to the *PostSecret* project (© copyright and reproduced by courtesy of Frank Warren and *PostSecret*).

experience of belonging and to confirm their emotional literacy in the keeping of secrets.

INTIMATE PUBLICS AND MARKETS

In the preface to *The Female Complaint* Berlant suggests that

the autobiographical isn't personal. . . . In the contemporary consumer public . . . all sorts of narratives are read as autobiographies of collective experience. The personal is the general. Publics presume intimacy. (vii)

Berlant's own interest in the intimate public of women's culture in contemporary America explicitly excludes autobiography (see *Female* viii), yet she includes an analysis of Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* in her wide-ranging discussion of the texts of women's intimate public in the US. However, as this special issue of *Biography* demonstrates, her concept of the intimate public has obvious relevance for our thinking about the uses of autobiography in contemporary culture. As Gillian Whitlock has argued, the capacity for autobiography to function as a "soft weapon" in

the organization of opinion and emotion in the public sphere should not be underestimated (3). The theory of the intimate public allows us to extend Whitlock's analysis of how autobiography travels and is deployed. I am particularly interested in how Berlant's formulation draws our attention to the political economy of contemporary autobiography. Central to this is Berlant's suggestion that intimate publics come into being "when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires" (*Female* 5). This element of Berlant's definition of the intimate public can further our thinking about the uses of autobiography in projects that occasion life writing, and invite participation from the public via content production, because it emphasizes that the circulation of life narrative texts can *produce* a public who "*feel* as though [the project] expresses what is common among them" (5, emphasis in original). Berlant's argument is that intimate publics generate a feeling in their audience-consumers that the common experiences *preexisted* the creation of the public: "that even before there was a market addressed to them, there



Figure 2: A postcard displayed on the *PostSecret* blog in January 2011 (© copyright and reproduced by courtesy of Frank Warren and *PostSecret*).

existed a world of strangers who would be emotionally literate in each other's experience of power, intimacy, desire and discontent" (5). Recognizing the importance of this affective resonance and identification, and this feeling of the experience always-already binding the public before texts were made that expressed them, helps contextualize the extraordinary speed with which people are prepared to share personal material online, and the speed with which intimate publics can develop and flourish in online environments.

In the case of *PostSecret*, the possession of a secret is the resonate, normative core of the intimate public. What it *means* to have a secret and how it *feels* to share it, however, is the emotional, social, and discursive work that the project undertakes by curating the participants' contributions and responses. In this sense, the postcards, as individual life narrative fragments, do not undertake the representative work traditionally associated with autobiography (particularly in the US), where the individual life story functions "within a representative structure where one stands for many" (Gilmore 19). Rather, each postcard works as a testament to the variety of ways that the structure of feeling at the core of the public ("we all have secrets") can be true and unifying. The generality of the claim that "we all have secrets" may seem too flimsy, or at least too general, to function as the normalizing claim of the intimate public, yet it also brings to stark attention the resilient normative power of the confessional form as the means for constituting subjects (Foucault 60–63). From a Berlantian perspective, *PostSecret* demonstrates how the form of the confession is used to normalize a structure of feeling—relief, a feeling of being seen and recognized for who one *really* is, what Berlant describes as "fantasies of belonging and reciprocity" (*Female* 66)—which has been fundamental to autobiographical genres and their effects (see Gilmore). As feminist theorists of autobiography have argued, confession has been fundamental to autobiography and its role in maintaining a model of selfhood and genre rooted in a view of the subject as stable and able to be structured and expressed (Gilmore 14–15, Smith). What *PostSecret* exemplifies in its use of the technologies of the postal system, Web 2.0, and book publishing is the extent to which the confessional form and confessional activity work to produce and structure affects of connection and reciprocity that unify a public not through an identification with the content of the narrative, or with the form of subjectivity the text presupposes, but through the formal organization of feeling that encountering certain types of texts produces. *PostSecret* is not the only project to use autobiographical fragments in this way. Another example is the practice of digital storytelling, which is used by a range of media organizations to present the experiences of marginalized communities (see Poletti).

AUTHENTIC FORMS

For an intimate public to flourish, its texts must feel authentic to its participants. In the case of a project like *PostSecret*, which mixes Web 2.0 modes of publishing with handmade texts and commercial book publication, a range of strategies is deployed for the texts to be read in this way. User generated content is a defining element of Web 2.0, whose texts, as Julie Rak has noted, use a range of “strategies of authentication” to present content and identities as believable and authentic. It’s important to note that these strategies are partly built into the software platforms that house the community of users, but they exist as well at the level of rhetorical and narrative strategies that draw on authentication used in other life narrative forms, such as the prevalence of first person point of view in personal blogs.

In the case of *PostSecret*, the authentication strategies used must overcome the barrier of anonymity; that is to say, unlike other autobiographical acts presented online, individual cards are not linked to user profiles or authorial identities of any kind. The *PostSecret* blog is housed on the free blog



Figure 3: A postcard displayed on the *PostSecret* blog in June 2010 (© copyright and reproduced by courtesy of Frank Warren and *PostSecret*).

site *Blogger* (owned by Google), and the only identity attached to the blog or any other media forms associated with the project is that of Frank Warren. The postcards cannot, then, function within the realm of the autobiographical pact (Lejeune). Instead, the authenticity of the postcards is secured through two distinct strategies: materiality, and the discourse of confession. In both cases, anonymity actually works *for* authentication, rather than against it, drawing on the audiences' preexisting literacy in the confessional mode.

In their materiality—the recurring presence of handwriting, collage, objects and photographs—the postcards constitute their authenticity as individual life narratives by presenting

physical traces of their authors. The idiosyncrasies of handwriting, the inclusion of objects (such as house keys, sewing threads, and flowers), and the use of cut and paste collage, support Warren's claim that he is the recipient of the cards, and suggest that he is not making them himself and trying to pass them off as separate contributions. Unless he is a master forger, or has enlisted an army of collaborators, it is unlikely that Warren himself is the author of the *PostSecret* cards.

The handmade nature of the texts reinforces the confessional meta narrative of the *PostSecret* project. Secrets are written down, leaving no digital trace in the life of the author as a saved file on a computer or in the cache of the internet browser (let alone as a locked diary under the bed which could be found by prying hands). Indeed, one of the reasons that *PostSecret* has been so successful in creating an intimate public around the possession and sharing of secrets is that it ingeniously uses the anonymity afforded by the postal system to authenticate the secrets. The holders of the secrets have made and shared them in such a way that anonymity is protected, but the texts they have produced are powerfully connected to *some body* through the materiality of the

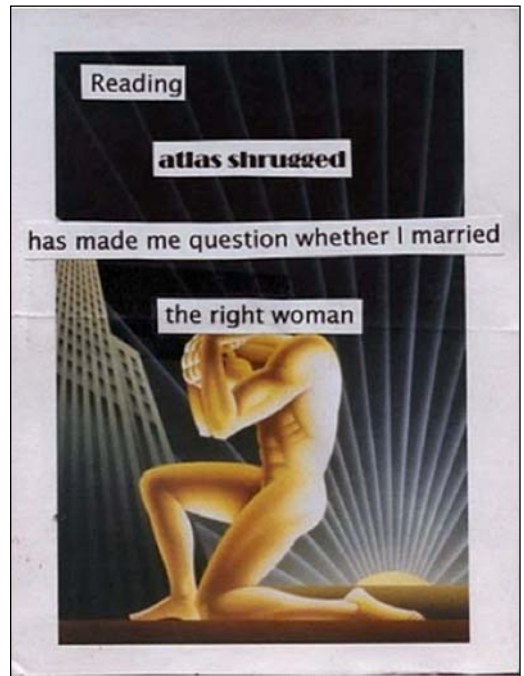


Figure 4: A postcard displayed on the *PostSecret* blog in June 2010 (© copyright and reproduced by courtesy of Frank Warren and *PostSecret*).

postcard. *PostSecret* creates an intimate public predicated on the possession of the secret, and while secrets are “shared” via the project, the individual authors remain anonymous, and thus the secrets *remain secrets* within the everyday lives of their authors. As an intimate public, *PostSecret* “is a space of mediation in which the personal [the secret] is refracted through the general [the possession of a secret]” (Berlant, *Female* viii) without the risk of exposure and consequent fallout associated with “going public” with one’s secret alone. This alters the role that confession plays in the construction of the individual autobiographical subjects, who remain unidentified in the project, but who, through confessing via the form and community of *PostSecret*, gain access to the feeling of community, and gain membership in a community of feeling, by sending in a physical claim to membership, posting to the forum on the *PostSecret* community website, or commenting on the Facebook page, confirming their literacy in the affect of secrets and confession.

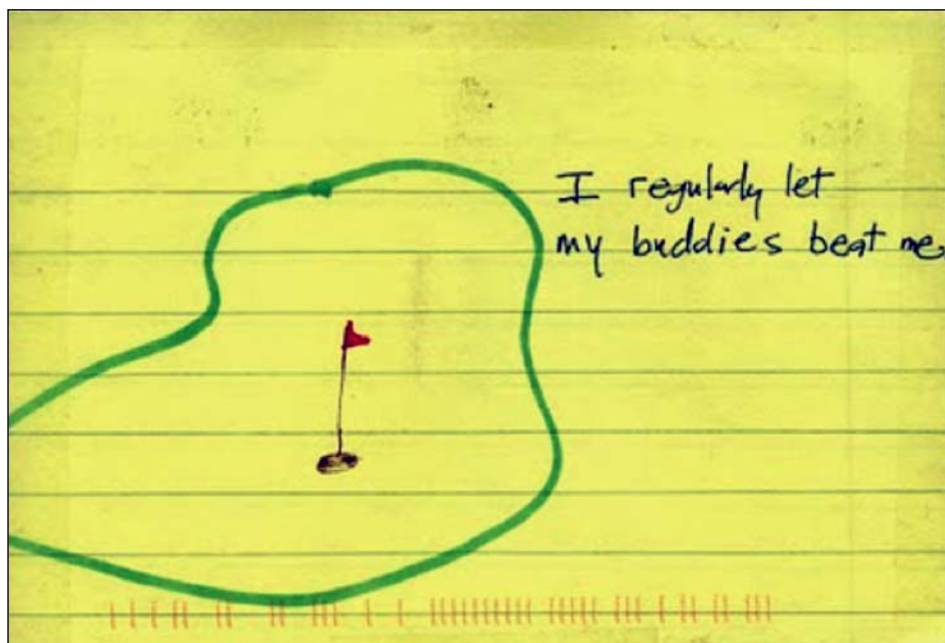


Figure 5: A postcard displayed on the *PostSecret* blog in June 2010 (© copyright and reproduced by courtesy of Frank Warren and *PostSecret*).

A subtext of the intimate public of *PostSecret* relates to the healing power of confession in an empathetic public, which is underscored by the power of what Susan Stewart describes as “the personal memento”: “souvenirs

of individual experience” often produced through “the salvage crafts” (139). Mementos of personal experiences, such as scrapbooks, memory quilts, and personal zines, are assembled to have an autobiographical function, Stewart suggests, “emblematic of the worth of that life and of the self’s capacity to generate worthiness” (149). Reading *PostSecret* as an intimate public, we can see that the need for Americans to generate experiences of self-worth via intimate acts such as constructing personal mementos that bare their secrets is symptomatic of the role of sentimentality and intimacy in “the privatization of U.S. citizenship” that has recast “citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values” (Berlant, “Introduction” 3–5). However, *PostSecret* is a transnational project, speaking from the US context to a globalized Western audience, particularly in the United Kingdom and Australia, which are increasingly similar to the United States in terms of dominant political ideologies regarding relationships between the individual and the state.

Warren’s instructions for coaxing the secrets (see Figure 1) play a pivotal role both in continuing to authenticate the secrets circulated in the intimate public and as the founding premise of the project: “Reveal *anything*—as long as it is true and you have never shared it with anyone before.” By insisting that the contributions be “true” and “new,” Warren places responsibility for the authenticity of the project back on the individual contributors. This creates an explicit frame for what all intimate publics seek to confirm: that the subject of the texts it circulates expresses affective states that preexisted the creation of the public itself. People possessed “true” secrets before there was *PostSecret*. They possessed a desire to share those secrets and to know the secrets of others; the project (merely) presents itself as the space in which the secrets can be shared, producing “an affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging” (Berlant, *Female* viii).

However, the form of the postcard, and Warren’s instructions to “be brief” and “creative,” should not be underestimated in terms of their power to shape the form and content of the secrets he wishes to receive. As “America’s most trusted stranger,” Warren has created a form of confessional autobiography which, through the establishment of considerable formal limits, leads its author-contributors to particular kinds of confession. A short visit to the *PostSecret* blog confirms that certain kinds of secrets are more suitable than others, and that formally, the postcard lends itself to short, often sentimentalized confessions that seek to confirm similarities rather than differences, and that largely forgo context in preference for statements that reiterate key affects of secret keeping. Shame, pain, disappointment, and regret

are recurrent (see Figure 2). So too are cards expressing release, relief, and freedom from the negative affects associated with the unshared secret (see Figure 3). The third mode, which provides important counterpoint to these weighty affective states, involves confessions of small everyday secrets, such as the card in Figure 5. Cards of this nature confirm that literacy in confession and secret-sharing is not dependent on personal experience of trauma, betrayal, or regret. The possession of *any* secret, and a willingness to share it and “hear” others, is what counts. As I have argued elsewhere in relation to digital storytelling, requests by the coxer of life narrative for brevity and creativity (usually defined in terms of aesthetic coherence and simplicity) often result in texts that privilege commonality over individuality (Poletti).

The card in Figure 3 confirms the success of *PostSecret* in forming a genre to which the members of the intimate public can successfully attach their desire to confess, to be heard, and to be literate in each other’s experiences of secret-keeping despite the often negative and melodramatic “truths” shared. This complex dynamic between the sentimental, the general, and the intimate, Berlant argues, defines the terrain of the intimate public. Through the texts of the intimate public an inherent conflict is held in tension: the desire to remain attached and proximate to normative subject positions which have proven disappointing is explored as a collective issue through the use of sentimental and melodramatic genres (see Berlant, *Female* 212–14). This is why so many secrets in the project are about the failure of the individual in relation to normative concepts of a (Western) life: home, heterosexuality and its attendant institutions, work, financial security, friendship, and love (see Figures 2 and 4).¹ The melodramatic form, in many ways an anathema to what autobiography critics might be tempted to call “good” (or interesting, or worthy of analysis) autobiography, is fundamental to the intimate public because the “density of a style of being” it provides *is* the consolation offered for the failure to achieve the fantasized “good life” (Berlant, *Female* 214).² The importance of remaining attached to life even in the face of disappointment is emphasized in the *PostSecret* project through its partnership with Hopeline, a US suicide helpline, and the ongoing donation of money raised by the project to support that operation. Again, a very simple subtext is clear here—we all have secrets, and our secrets can kill us—and the powerful tension between the disappointments brought about by failed attachments to normative ideas about life and the need to remain attached to them is rendered as a life or death struggle. Thus, the statement that “everyone else’s secrets are slowly but surely saving my life” (Figure 3) is both a clear affirming statement of what the members of the intimate public of *PostSecret* *feel* is at stake, and an adherence to the formal conventions of the public.³

The *PostSecret* project website includes a statement contextualizing the “truth” of each card, emphasizing that the cards are artworks. In doing so, it confirms the elements of the project outlined above. The “truth” expressed in *PostSecret* is situated on a scale that includes the capacity to inspire epiphanies in readers regardless of whether or not the authors of each card are confessing a secret they truly hold. This confirms the importance of the affective power of the project, which does not seek to document or even narrate the diversity of secrets held by the community it creates, but rather aims to provide a structure of feeling around secrets and confession that normalizes the importance of the act of confession in the formation of subjects (Foucault 59–63), as well as structuring the complex scene of attachment and disappointment outlined above. As an intimate public, subjectivity is organized in *PostSecret* around the collectivized affective pleasures of confessing the ownership of a secret (“yes, I too have a secret”), and the redemptive power of uttering it. It appears to confirm Foucault’s suggestion that Western society is populated by confessing animals (60). In successfully transforming a confessional art project into an intimate public, Warren produces a market for the book collections and speaking events by promoting these items as key points of community membership (see the *PostSecret Community* website).

A project such as *PostSecret* raises a number of compelling questions for autobiography studies, many of which cannot be adequately answered using a narrative-focused approach. On its own, an individual *PostSecret* card is too slight to contain any of the literary tropes associated with self-representational narrative, and like an individual “tweet” on a Twitter account, is too short to present a story that can produce meaning. However, *PostSecret* is not a serial text intended to be read in its entirety, nor is it one that a scholar (no matter how dedicated) can “finish” reading. The project is live—dynamic and changing—yet the ways of making meaning it offers remain incredibly stable. An intimate public spread across multiple mediums, the textuality of *PostSecret* is networked and partial, yet it has proven to be incredibly resilient, powerful, and commercially successful. Berlant’s theory and analysis of the affective function of texts make possible an interpretation of the *PostSecret* project that can account for the nature of its success and the formulation of its truth claims. In *PostSecret* we see a community formed around the attachments produced by the confessional mode, where the act of self-representation is undertaken not for representational purposes, but for the affective intensities and literacy it produces and confirms. Of course, the specter of the truth claims made by the cards remains. Yet reading *PostSecret* as an intimate public, we can interpret the success of the project as a testament to the power of affect to drive audiences’ attachments to autobiographical modes.

NOTES

1. Religion also features heavily in the secrets; see Warren.
2. Optimism and ambivalence also play important roles in this formulation; see Berlant, *Female* 212–14.
3. My thanks to Margaretta Jolly for raising the question of melodramatic form and content in the *PostSecret* cards.

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