



Now You See Me, But You Don't: Neoliberal Visibility and the Politics of Being Counted

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The article examines the co-occurrence of the 2010 United States census and Arizona Senate Bill 1070 under President Barack Obama's administration to unpack how nonnormative exceptionalism, or the practice of petitioning the state to increase the visibility of marginalized subjects, laid the groundwork for President Donald Trump's violent targeting of vulnerable populations. By analyzing a promotional video that instructs trans people to "come out" on the census and an animated video that critiques U.S. settler colonialism and immigrant exclusion, this article argues that neoliberal visibility divides and conquers marginalized populations through the logic of colonial settlement.

Much of what is commonly referred to as the United States is, in fact, an illegal occupation of Native lands. In other words, America is filled with illegal immigrants. ...The dominant settler group who's acting all bent out of shape over what to do with these illegal immigrants, they have yet to acknowledge their own status as settlers, their own status as illegal immigrants. ...The people going on and on about the immigration crisis—whether they're white, or black, or brown, or whatever—unless they're Native American they're settlers too.

— *The Pinky Show*, "How to Solve Illegal Immigration," 2007

On Being Counted Out: Banning Trans and "Show Me Your Papers"

The political climate following the 2016 United States presidential election has thrown the crisis of liberal democracy into sharp relief, revealing its roots in white supremacy, settler colonialism, and neoliberalism. Neoliberal and settler colonial policies have proliferated rapidly under Donald Trump's administration, with intensified policing of national borders, racially and religiously motivated immigration measures, the deregulation of the public sector, and the privatization of natural and cultural resources such as the Dakota Access Pipeline.¹

Trump's policies have also shattered inclusion as a mechanism of state recognition and the regulation of difference. For instance, the administration's memo to narrow definitions of gender to genitalia and sex assigned at birth goes against changes in federal policy under Barack Obama's administration that allowed interpretations of Title IX to include transgender people. Additionally, the "transgender troop ban" forbids transgender military members from serving openly and bans the military from paying for gender-affirming surgeries and hormones. Liberal outcry against the ban has primarily protested Trump's framing of trans healthcare as an economic burden on cisgender taxpayers by repurposing the conservative narrative of marginalized people requesting "special treatment." We argue, however, that these contests



over trans inclusion renegotiate U.S. discourses of neoliberal subjectivity and state recognition. Namely, which nonnormative subjects can be included in the U.S. settler project as exceptional, worthy of respect and protection?

Trump's termination of transgender people's right to participate in citizenship through the anti-trans memo and the transgender troop ban signals a continuation of neoliberal biopolitics that Obama's administration endorsed. To trace the emergence of state-sanctioned transphobia under Trump, we glance backward to a critical moment of liberal inclusion under Obama: the 2010 United States census (United States Census Bureau, n.d.-b). A decade ago, the 2010 census facilitated massive community organizing efforts—particularly within queer and trans communities—to ensure that marginalized populations were counted in national and state decision-making and the allocation of resources. Yet, that same year, Arizona Senate Bill 1070 was signed into law and served as a precedent for immigration exclusion measures that Trump has multiplied and intensified (Arizona State Senate 2010).

Nonnormative Exceptionalism: Trans Visibility and Immigrant Exclusion

In this article, we examine two seemingly disparate state mechanisms—the 2010 U.S. census and Arizona SB 1070—to analyze how biopolitical population control divides marginalized people along an axis of nonnormative exceptionalism and unassimilable deviance.

Nonnormative exceptionalism is the practice of petitioning the state for recognition as a marginalized population under whitenormative citizenship, whereas unassimilable deviance is the condition of being excluded for being too different.² Trans visibility partakes in nonnormative exceptionalism because seeking visibility on the census endorses whitenormative citizenship that renders undocumented immigrants unassimilable and excludable.

Analyzing how trans visibility and immigrant exclusion work as state mechanisms of biopolitical population control entails discussing their entanglement with settler colonialism. As Amy Brandzel contends, “anti-immigration laws and rhetoric not only target racialized migrants, but they simultaneously reproduce the settler colonial project of (re)claiming Native territory” (2016, 2). The 2010 U.S. census and Arizona SB 1070 are processes of demarcating United States' territory by deciding who counts and who does not.³ Patrick Wolfe (2006, 402) argues that more explicitly, the battle to include or exclude populations in the United States relies on assimilationist discourses that continuously eschew Native sovereignty in the name of liberal democracy. The 2010 census questionnaire participates in the erasure of Indigenous Peoples by conflating Indigeneity with race, thereby obscuring settler colonialism behind the façade of multicultural inclusion.⁴ Similarly, what underlies Arizona SB 1070's immigrant exclusion is the U.S. nation-state's invasion and theft of Native land and resources. Through the 2010 U.S. census and Arizona SB 1070, Native dispossession continues because of non-Native people's desire to belong and be seen as legitimate national subjects. This desire undergirds prevalent discourses of respectability and whitenormative citizenship.

While we critique appeals to neoliberal visibility and inclusion, we also understand that this response by marginalized people is due to threats to survival that beget defensive strategies such as *wanting* to be seen by the state. Drawing on Karma R. Chávez's (2013) discussion of visibility as an ongoing site of existential and communal struggle, we approach trans activists' inclusionary aspirations by taking into account the realities of discrimination, erasure, and



death that trans people experience and fear.⁵ We engage in coalitional politics to answer Brandzel's call to work "against hegemonic anti-intersectionality by not only drawing the connections across the violence of normativities, but also by working to queer the collective faith in citizenship, belonging, and inclusion" (2016, 27). Moving from faith in citizenship, we revisit responses to the 2010 census and SB 1070 in order to attend to the relationalities and moments of unexpected resistance within neoliberal visibility.

By analyzing cultural productions in response to the 2010 census and SB 1070, we argue that attempts at inclusion and methods of exclusion under Obama's administration set the stage to target all vulnerable populations, regardless of perceived degrees of social respectability. As noted by Brandzel (2016), Obama enacted the "Secure Communities" program in 2008 and, in 2009, he signed into federal law a revision of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1996. Both policies made way for the deportation of anyone in custody, or arrested, by deputizing local and state police as border patrol agents, and by sharing information about detainees' immigration status between local law enforcement and Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) (1-2). The securing of whitenormative citizenship through SB 1070 was a direct outcome of the logics of surveillance that Obama's policies put into play. Liberal democracy under Obama became a vehicle for neoliberal politics and public policies to remove non-white, non-cisheteronormative, and illegalized bodies. The Trump administration is now intensifying these tactics.

According to Wendy Brown (2005), Aihwa Ong (2006), and Nikolas Rose (1999), neoliberalism is a political paradigm built on the market ideology that excludes domestic subjects who are seen as less self-sustainable, such as poor, racialized, and Indigenous populations. Thus, U.S. citizens are not guaranteed legal protection unless they prove themselves capable of self-governance or distinguish themselves as exceptional subjects—that is, unlike those represented as socioeconomic burdens. Importantly, the fact that citizens' mobility is facilitated at the expense of others shows how illegality has been strategically applied to repudiate internal populations. According to Sara Ahmed (2004), this strategic application of illegality is achieved through the circulation of hate and fear, which is structurally reinforced through public policies and everyday interactions. This is a key reason why, in the wake of the 2010 U.S. census, marginalized populations have felt the need to be counted and seen as autonomous citizen-subjects.

The political trajectory from Obama's immigrant exclusion under the cloak of liberal multicultural inclusion to Trump's outright repudiation of nonnormative populations reveals that exceptionalism cannot protect populations marked deviant or unassimilable. We must, therefore, investigate and challenge both exclusion *and* bids for inclusion because there is no better time than the present to deconstruct investments in assimilation and imagine survival beyond state-sanctioned recognition.

State Mechanisms of Inclusion/Exclusion: The U.S. Census and Arizona Senate Bill 1070

In the spring of 2010, the U.S. government mandated that everyone residing in the United States participate in the national census to help determine the distribution of public resources, including healthcare, education, and housing facilities. On the heels of the census, a national grassroots movement in the transgender community called for trans people to write in their gender identities on census forms in order to be visible and counted. A few months after census



forms were mailed to residences, Governor Jan Brewer signed Arizona Senate Bill 1070 (the Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act) to allow law enforcement officers to arrest and detain without a warrant anyone who appeared to them to be “undocumented.” In response to SB 1070, *Puente Arizona*, a grassroots migrant justice organization based in Phoenix, and the National Day Laborers Organizing Network started the *Alto Arizona* campaign to provide organizing tools to local communities and put pressure on the government to end the law (*Alto Arizona*, n.d.). *Alto Arizona* called for the termination of police-ICE partnerships and detentions legalized by Governor Brewer, and protested Joe Arpaio, former Sheriff of Maricopa County, who was infamous for conducting massive immigration raids (see fig. 1).



Figure 1: *Alto Arizona*.

Despite large-scale activist efforts to prevent the legalization of Arizona SB 1070 and the further institutionalization of racial profiling, the bill prevailed and consequently intensified intra-national border control. Although the 2010 U.S. census and SB 1070 may not seem related because the census looks like an attempt at inclusion and the bill looks like a violent effort at exclusion, their co-occurrence is not a coincidence. In the next section, we examine how state regimes of border control and census collection operate as twin mechanisms for managing difference. These twin mechanisms use the logic of visibility to pit marginalized populations against each other. Census collection fuels the desire of marginalized citizens to be seen by the



state, but the production of nonnormative citizenship simultaneously reinforces settler colonial regimes of border control that render illegalized people hypervisible in order to expel them from the nation.

On Being Included: *The Pinky Show* and “Census 2010: We Matter We Count”

Bodies that cross presumably natural borders expose how U.S. regulation of identities as “foreign” or “other” forgets settler colonialism. Historically, heteronormative and whitenormative citizenship have been mobilized to discipline and exclude queer, brown bodies by eliminating Indigenous, migrant, and other nonnormative subjects (Brandzel 2016, 4). In the era of neoliberal globalization beginning in the 1970s, citizenship ceases to be articulated strictly in terms of nation-state territory and becomes constituted through capitalist self-autonomy (Ong 2006, 6-7). The specter of settler colonialism haunts the entrepreneurial subjectivity that incentivizes and institutionalizes normative values such as nuclear family formation and class privilege. For people who have been devalued based on race, immigration status, and gender or sexual identity, being recognized by the state as legitimate citizens—or as nonnormative exceptions—can afford protections from threats of violence and communal erasure. However, state inclusion is always attached to ongoing and new exclusions of people deemed too different to assimilate.

In tracking settler colonial amnesia and minoritarian desire to be seen and counted, we analyze two short YouTube videos that circulated on Facebook following the passage of SB 1070 and during the census in early 2010—one critiquing inclusionary politics and the other advocating for it. The first video is an episode from *The Pinky Show* (2017) titled “How to Solve Illegal Immigration.” *The Pinky Show* is an animated series focusing on “information and ideas that have been misrepresented, suppressed, ignored, or otherwise excluded from mainstream discussion” (*The Pinky Show*, n.d.). It is produced by Associated Animals Inc., a non-profit educational organization based near Death Valley, California. Initially produced in 2007 but widely circulated in 2010, *The Pinky Show* episode features two animated cats, Pinky and Daisy, discussing racist nationalist discourses about “illegal” immigration and European settlers’ forgetting of U.S. settler colonialism (see fig. 2). We also analyzed wematterwecount2010’s (2010) “Census 2010: We Matter We Count,” a video guide produced by and for transgender people explaining how to write one’s gender identity on the census form. Featuring mostly trans people of color from Los Angeles, “Census 2010: We Matter We Count” informs trans and gender-nonconforming audiences of the importance of census participation.



Figure 2: *The Pinky Show*.



Cultural productions, namely *The Pinky Show* and “Census 2010: We Matter We Count,” underscore that the inclusion *and* exclusion of marginalized populations in the United States originate from settler colonial amnesia.

The Double Bind of Visibility: How Counting Constitutes Legibility and Legality

First, as we shall see, visibility is an ambivalent construct. On the 2010 U.S. census, the act of marking an identity in the boxes provided is promoted as a path towards political and legal recognition. As the census publicity poster below states, “By answering 10 simple questions you can help improve your schools, hospitals, job training programs, public transportation and much more. Take time to make a difference by completing and returning your form. ...We can’t move forward until you mail it back” (see fig. 3; United States Census Bureau 2010a).

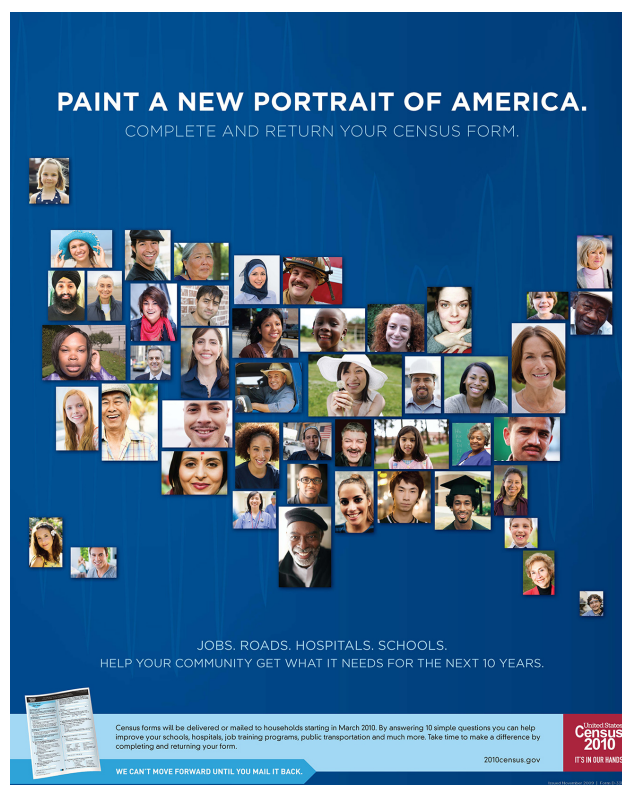


Figure 3: 2010 U.S. Census.



Here, the act of completing the census form demonstrates a political commitment: being counted is thereby equated with improving, or investing in, one's community. Although visibility for nonnormative representation is presented in a positive light because it allows for recognition and resource allocation, visibility in the context of border control can be dangerous. In Arizona SB 1070, individuals without legal status to be in the United States are rendered hypervisible as threats to the nation. The rhetoric of undocumented immigrants as "illegal" secures the legality of U.S. residents and upholds the supremacy and exclusivity of American citizenship. The desirable visibility of people counted on the U.S. census and the dangerous visibility of "illegal" subjects in immigration law illustrate state mechanisms of biopolitical population control.

Although participation in the 2010 census can lead to state recognition of one's subjectivity, as the publicity illustrates, the recognition that might "improve your schools, hospitals, job training programs, public transportation and much more" should not be mistaken as benign visibility. According to Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality, power operates at the moment when a state grants recognition to an individual (1991, 91). The U.S. government uses the census to determine the types of public resources that correspond to communities, which signals that a population's visibility entails its subjection to state control.

Visibility does not simply mean gaining recognition, and mobility often implies monitored movement. To further the discussion of visibility and mobility as modes of state regulation, we return to Ahmed's work on affective fear, which describes the relationships among desirability, mobility, and deviance. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed writes, "It is no accident that in political rhetoric, freedom and fear are increasingly opposed: the new freedom is posited as the freedom from fear, and as the freedom to move. But which bodies are granted such freedom to move? And which bodies become read as the origin of fear and as threatening 'our' freedom?" (2004, 70-71). Due to whitenormativity, undocumented immigrants of color are rendered hypervisible as objects of fear. In this context, freedom means the ability to move without fear of being arrested or deported. The affective economy of hatred directed at illegalized bodies facilitates the forgetting of violent histories that naturalized whitenormative and heteronormative bodies as "loved objects" in the United States. Freedom implies the protection of these "loved objects"—particularly U.S. citizens—from the objects of hate and fear: the foreigner, the undocumented, the terrorist (80). At the same time, the process of naturalizing white populations in the colonial nation-state displaces the mobile freedom of Indigenous Peoples. In our epigraph from *The Pinky Show's* (2007) episode "How to Solve Illegal Immigration," Daisy underscores this point by critiquing the logic of settler colonialism: he redefines "illegal immigrants" as white settlers who have illegally occupied Native land (see fig. 4).⁶



Figure 4: *The Pinky Show*.

Moreover, Daisy reframes moments in U.S. history when racialized populations became targeted by discourses of illegality. He explains how spaces are territorialized by dominant groups through the affective circulation of fear (see fig. 5):

You know, we act like the laws that sort immigrants into legal- or illegal-types dropped out of the sky directly from god. Of course not, laws are made and enforced by the dominant group in a society, generally to benefit...themselves! Just like how you can put millions of black people in jail by creating a “War on Drugs” or terrorize entire nations by inventing a so-called “War on Terror,” you can attack people by making them “illegal.” You demonize them, you attribute every social ill you can think of to their presence. (*The Pinky Show* 2007)

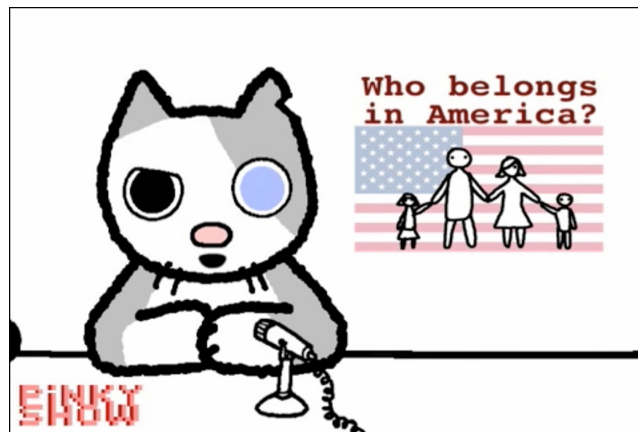


Figure 5: *The Pinky Show*.

Pinky and Daisy’s reparative history explicates state mechanisms that create “illegal” types through not only immigration law, but any law used to frame certain racialized, sexualized, and gendered bodies as “criminal.” Colonialism and Native studies scholars Joey Mogul, Andrea Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock have analyzed how European settlers projected deviant sexualities and uncleanness onto Indigenous populations and policed them from the earliest contact (2011, 1-6). The Removal Act of 1830 implemented almost seventy Native displacement laws as a result of U.S. government officials’ manipulative bribes and threats to local tribes (Office of the Historian, n.d.). In essence, U.S. citizenry and the concept of property rights materialized through settler colonial practices. Daisy and Pinky highlight that the dialectic of freedom debated via neoliberal discourses of citizenship and immigration reform have direct precedents in settler colonial territorialization, mass incarceration of African Americans during the “War on Drugs,” and surveillance of “Muslim” bodies post-9/11 and into Trump’s presidency. Codified by law, affective economies of hate and fear mobilize the policing, entrapping, and containing of illegalized bodies.

In an effort to subvert conditions of illegality, marginalized subjects have resorted to discourses of normative citizenship. According to Chávez (2013), visibility has been used by marginalized populations, such as queer and undocumented people, as a strategy of seeking inclusion and protection by the U.S. nation-state. Analyzing the practice of “coming out,”



Chávez frames queer visibility as an articulation of assimilationist politics: “In the United States the predominant narrative of coming out as a political act is a citizenship narrative, and one that is at least partially built into a belief in American exceptionalism” (94). When the strategy of visibility is taken up by immigrant rights movements such as DREAM activism—one of the most *visible* immigrant movements over the past decade—it extends the reach of state control through whitenormative citizenship.⁷ DREAM activists’ usage of the “good student” narrative to secure legal status further excludes undocumented immigrants who do not fit this profile of respectability and upward mobility, and it works to reproduce settler colonial territorialization by positing universities and colleges as agents of forced assimilation. However, Chávez contends that “lacking the protection of legal citizenship does require, at least in part, a more generous reading of DREAM activists’ normative and inclusionary aspirations given what they are risking and working against” (111). The tensions between aspiring to respectability norms and continuing to struggle with dreadful conditions of hypervisibility/invisibility drive home the point that visibility is a double bind for marginalized populations. As we further elaborate in the next section, visibility via performances of normative citizenship is a mandate under neoliberalism for all subjects irrespective of legal citizenship status.

Neoliberal Visibility and Entrepreneurial Citizenship

In the era of neoliberal globalization, citizenship becomes less tied to the nation-state and increasingly connected to the privilege of mobility and entrepreneurial subjectivity. Brown (2005), Ong (2006), and Rose (1999) underscore how neoliberal biopolitics produce individuals as entrepreneurial subjects capable of self-governance and rational decision-making. Brown argues that neoliberalism is “the extension of economic rationality to formerly non-economic domains and institutions [reaching] individual conduct” (2005, 42). The ideal citizen must become entrepreneurial by utilizing rationality in a “variety of practices regulating life, medical care, welfare benefits, professional activity and so forth” (Rose 1999, 27). Entrepreneurial citizenship, although extended to privileged foreign nationals, excludes domestic subjects such as poor, racialized, and Indigenous populations who are perceived as less capable of making good choices (Ong 2006, 2-3). The exclusion of internal populations—categorized as surplus—is required for the functioning of capitalism and, we contend, neoliberalism.

Interrogating neoliberal capitalist calculations and choices, Ong discusses how some populations become “exceptions to neoliberalism.” Ong argues that the nation-state’s exclusion of nonnormative subjects from political protection and social safety nets preserves the benefits of capitalist development only for normative subjects (2006, 3-4). It is worth noting that Ong’s use of the term *exception* in this sense implies exclusion from neoliberal calculations and choices, whereas we use the term *nonnormative exceptionalism* to denote a tactic of inclusion by the neoliberal state. Being exceptional means “pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps,” or becoming one of the few who can “overcome” culturally and institutionally fabricated conditions of marginalization in order to measure up to settler colonial whitenormative citizenship, which constitutes the basis of liberal equality and inclusion. Making efficient choices to better oneself is an ethical mandate for being viewed as a “good citizen” and thereby institutes individualistic competition as a strategy of belonging.



Participation in the census is one way in which marginalized subjects stake a claim in the neoliberal calculus of belonging. In conjunction with demography, immigration legislation since the onset of neoliberalism has facilitated the development of an entrepreneurial workforce and family norm. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 made citing narratives of heteronormative kinship through transnational family reunification and marriage the fastest and surest way of becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen. According to Chandan Reddy, “federal immigration policies such as Family Reunification extend and institute heteronormative community structures as a requirement for accessing welfare provisions for new immigrants by attaching those provisions to the family unit” (2005, 110). The transition in U.S. immigration law from the national origins quota system to a preference system, based on familial relationships and employment, allows for the inclusion of people demonstrating normative kinship and class values. It corresponds with Cold War liberal multiculturalist ideals of the “American melting pot” and the neoliberal turn of transnational capital to subsume skilled workers at low wages.

Reddy analyzes the historical underpinnings of neoliberal state policies that put a double bind on straight and queer immigrants of color who do not fit hetero- and homonormative kinship configurations. He argues that the passage of the Welfare Reform Act, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, and the Counterterrorism Act in 1995-1996 “worked to politically and economically disenfranchise the noncitizen and simultaneously redirect capital’s surpluses back into the economy” and “specifically denied immigrants the basic rights of all workers at a time when the immigrant [was] a category primarily composed of Latino, Asian, and Caribbean people” (2005, 105). As Reddy contends, this conspicuous exception to neoliberal calculations and choices is reserved for poor, racialized, nonheteronormative subjects. Most disconcertingly, the entrepreneurial citizen-as-capitalist could be distinguished from the racialized noncitizen through the performance of normative kinship. As we see in the call for queer visibility on census forms, being counted requires citing state-recognized and normativized forms of kinship. The recent legalization of same-sex family reunification is an extension of the newly included homonormative subject.

The “Missing” Box: Creating Trans Visibility on the U.S. Census

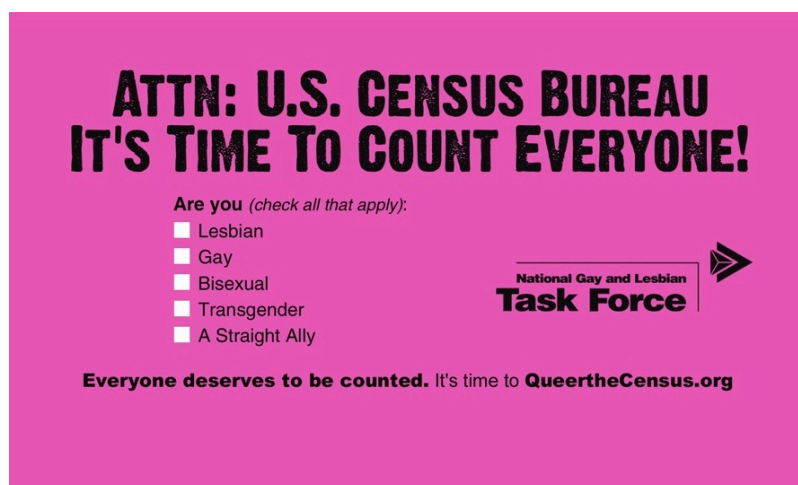


Figure 6: Census envelope sticker by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.



In light of the desire to obtain political recognition, several mainstream LGBT organizations and grassroots queer and trans activist groups urged community members to fill out 2010 U.S. census forms (see fig. 6; National LGBTQ Task Force, n.d.). They were concerned that the census did not have questions that addressed sexual orientation and gender identity. Our Families Count, an online public education campaign launched in 2009, prompted LGBT people to declare their marital or relationship status and trans people to check either the male or female box on the “sex” question that best described their gender identity (Our Families Count, *Census 2010—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Visibility*, n.d.-a) (see fig. 7).



Figure 7: Our Families Count website.

Funded by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation and the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law, Our Families Count was a collaborative effort by LGBT activists, politicians, academics, and business owners across the United States to make the LGBT population visible on the census.⁸ According to its website,

Our Families Count has only one mission: to educate and motivate all LGBT Americans and households to be visible in 2010, and to take part in the 2010 U.S. Census. This education campaign also reflects our deepening cooperation with the U.S. Census Bureau, which has actively sought our leadership in reaching out to many Americans who so often are overlooked and undercounted. They share our goal in achieving an accurate picture of our true numbers in the United States. (Our Families Count, *Census 2010—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Visibility*, n.d.-b)

This passage indicates that visibility implies a “deepening cooperation” with the state, and that “true numbers” will be generated if LGBT Americans start coming out on the census. The goal of Our Families Count was to make LGBT individuals fulfill their civic duty and comply



with state regulation, thereby locating expressions of self within the confines of identity categories. This advice does not challenge the cisheteronormative systems of classification that constitute the grounds for queer and trans discrimination in the first place.

In mid-March of 2010 when census forms were mailed to residences, LGBT organizations and queer grassroots movements, including Our Families Count, produced online videos instructing sexual and gender minorities to complete the forms and providing tips for making their identities visible (United States Census Bureau 2010b). During that time, YouTube and other online media websites became crucial sites for community building. We now turn to a YouTube video produced by transgender people and their allies in Los Angeles titled “Census 2010: We Matter We Count” (see fig. 8; [wematterwecount2010 2010](#)).

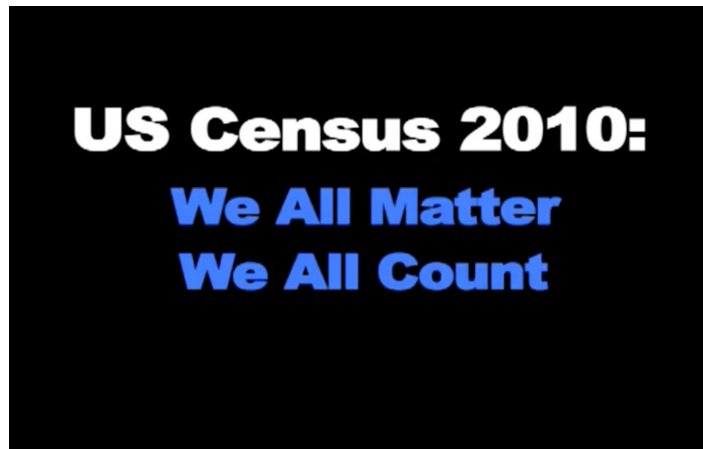


Figure 8: “Census 2010: We Matter We Count.”

Posted on March 12, 2010, “Census 2010: We Matter We Count” is a two-minute video featuring mostly transgender people of color speaking about the importance of trans people’s participation in the 2010 census. The video was a collaboration between the Children’s Hospital Los Angeles Transgender Youth Program and the Pitzer College “Media Arts for Social Justice” course.⁹ The production process offered an educational opportunity and a space for coalition-building among mostly trans youth of color and cisgender college students (Media Arts for Social Justice, n.d.).

Compared to other census 2010 promotional videos targeting mainstream LGBT audiences, “Census 2010: We Matter We Count” is relatively low budget and technically simple.¹⁰ However, what we found to be strategically different is how the video advises the audience to deal with question six, which offers limited sex options. Unlike the Our Families Count website’s instructions to trans people to choose male or female, “Census 2010: We Matter We Count” urges gender-nonconforming people to draw a new box next to the original options on the census form and write in their gender identity (e.g., MTF, FTM, androgynous, genderqueer, transgender) ([wematterwecount2010 2010](#)) (see fig. 9).



their claims to state protection and resources in the first place. This representational strategy of nonnormative exceptionalism posits identifying with the U.S. nation-state as central to community and, by extension, the full inclusion of marginalized subjects.

Trans, Immigrant, Indigenous: Unsettling the Politics of Being Counted

The appearance of trans immigrants of color in “Census 2010: We Matter We Count” unsettles the video’s claim that community and survival of marginalized subjects depend on allegiance to the U.S. nation-state. Asking why certain groups count to have access to job training, education, and healthcare forces the subject to rely on affectual networks and ties to the nation to claim a legitimate place within it. In other words, one must claim an affect of love towards the nation (and its citizenry) in exchange for care received from state recognition and resources. According to this nationalist rhetoric, trans people must be assimilated in order to be counted by a regulatory mechanism. However, the presence of trans immigrants of color in the video resists an assimilation narrative because experiencing immigration as a racialized subject implies encountering a multitude of socially and institutionally created obstacles (e.g., racism, legal status, language barriers, cultural differences) that render one’s relation to the United States precarious. Their presence also underscores that what the census counts (on) is a circulation of affect between citizen and state. Therefore, the comments by trans people of color in “Census 2010: We Matter We Count” regarding normative kinship ties to other U.S. citizens reveal the underlying logics of neoliberal citizenship.

Nonnormative exceptionalism entails assimilation via individualistic recognition. In “Census 2010: We Matter We Count,” a voiceover tells the audience how to be counted as a gender-nonconforming person: “To be counted on your 2010 census form, find question six and draw a box to mark your gender identity” (wematterwecount2010 2010). Interestingly, the video does not instruct the audience to contest normative binary sex categories by crossing out the M/F boxes, or to question the notion of gender identity stemming from sex by crossing out that category and writing in gender. Instead, the trans subject adds a box with an individualized gender label. In the video, animated pencil markings write in “MTF,” “androgynous,” “genderqueer,” “FTM,” “Transgender” next to the hand-drawn box. Here, trans subjects count themselves in to the state’s calculus so the state can count them too. While the video pitches visibility as unambiguously positive and self-actualizing for trans and gender-nonconforming people, some statements by trans people of color hint at what can never be quantified by state practices of counting.

The act of making oneself count by creating one’s own box eschews intersectional coalitional politics and partakes in the logic that translates settler colonialism into multicultural inclusion by reducing Indigeneity to race in question nine. Although it could be said that diverse people creating their own census promotional videos is by default intersectional and coalitional, we contend that petitioning the state for visibility, resources, and redress on the back of Indigenous erasure demonstrates the failure of intersectional coalitional politics. The conflation of Indigenous erasure with the racialized incorporation of settlers of color through the census is central to U.S. settler territorialization. According to Wolfe, “we cannot simply say that settler colonialism or genocide have been targeted at particular races, since a race cannot be taken as given. It is made in the targeting. Black people were racialized as slaves; slavery



constituted their blackness. Correspondingly, Indigenous North Americans were not killed, driven away, romanticized, assimilated, fenced in, bred White, and otherwise eliminated as the original owners of the land but *as Indians*" (2006, 388). Wolfe describes Indigenous racialization as a process of disappearance, while racialization for non-Native people of color is a process of labor extraction through colonial settlement.

Yet "Census 2010: We Matter We Count" also suggests profound moments of resistance outside the box. The production space of the project allowed for coalition-building among cis and trans folks of color to wrestle with the messy work of trying to "refuse, work against, and sometimes fall prey to the script that political actions should contort to the anti-intersectionalities of citizenship in order to be successful" (Brandzel 2016, 146). We see this tension in the citation of neoliberal visibility politics and simultaneous potential for their disruption. Most importantly, we believe that the technical skill sets and experiences of cultural production that the trans youth of color earned through this project constituted a process of coalition that should not be underestimated. As we move towards the 2020 census within a climate of increased trans and immigrant regulation, we must prioritize manifesting queer kinship on the ground, rather than on government paper. Decennial bids for inclusion via the census are not viable compared to daily practices of care and community outside the discourse of state data collection.

Conclusion: Now You See Me, But You Don't

The Pinky Show's "How to Solve Illegal Immigration" and the promotional video "Census 2010: We Matter We Count" illustrate that neoliberal visibility divides and conquers marginalized populations through the logic of colonial settlement. Under current conditions, Indigenous Peoples are erased from public consciousness in order for non-Native communities of color, undocumented immigrants, and trans people to imagine a legitimate form of recognition and care through governmental regulation. While the "Census 2010: We Matter We Count" video and Our Families Count website suggest that their goal is making hetero- and homonormative kinship structures visible to the U.S. government, the strategy they employ can be reframed to examine and support the ways in which people of color, immigrants, and queer and trans people create alternative networks of care that will never be visible to those drafting immigration reform. In fact, several trans people of color in "Census 2010: We Matter We Count" articulated alternative networks by declaring practices of queer intimacy outside of the legible confines of identity and respectability.

The question of which practices of belonging sustain nonnormative lives and modalities of being is crucial to ask. This article thus offers a critique of nonnormative exceptionalism as a practice of petitioning the state to visibilize marginalized subjects. We hope our contribution will help to shift strategies away from seeking safety through whitenormative citizenship to cultivating accountable relational practices on the ground. Over our decade-long collaboration against legitimization via exceptionalism, we have contended that the accumulated damage of being nonnormative will not be addressed by becoming more visible through assimilation. As Brandzel asserts, the "violence of [normative] citizenship, like time, does not pass, it *accumulates*" (2016, 146). Dara Lind (2019) argues that the Trump administration's push to include a citizenship question on the 2020 census intensifies accumulated damage from



SB 1070, institutionalizing the census as a potential device of immigration enforcement and making explicit who will not be counted. It is now apparent that visibility—an articulation of pride, legal rights, and basic existence in the liberal imagination—increases vulnerability for the most marginalized and ignorance for the exceptionally included.

From 2010 to 2020, a decade during which we have observed and experienced aggressive neoliberal erasures and enclosures of difference, we have stayed committed to manifesting visions of queer futurity in the here and now. As theorized by José Esteban Muñoz, “Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present;” and it is “from shared critical dissatisfaction [that] we arrive at collective potentiality” (2009, 1, 189). Queer futurity will always be in the making, always too early, too late, never on time. As long as people seek freedom in assimilation and exception, then our critique of visibility will be well timed.

Notes

1. According to Rebecca Hersher (2017), the 2016 construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline caused international controversy due to the destruction of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation’s land and water supply. After multiple incidents of law enforcement aggression against protestors at Standing Rock, President Obama halted construction of the pipeline in December 2016, but President Trump reversed the order in January 2017.
2. Amy Brandzel describes citizenship as an aspirational and inherently anti-intersectional normativizing project that violently reifies cultural and social norms of whiteness (2016, 4-5).
3. We use the term *citizen* to refer to those recognized as contributing subjects of the nation-state, whether or not they are technically U.S. citizens or permanent residents. In other words, the concept of the “citizen” encompasses not only legal status but also moral and symbolic statuses.
4. Question nine of the 2010 census reads “What is person 1’s race? *Mark one or more boxes.*” Among the racial and ethnic categories listed, there is a checkbox for “American Indian or Alaska Native” with a blank field below to “*Print the name of enrolled or principled tribe.*” This question also lists a checkbox for “Native Hawaiian” (United States Census Bureau, n.d.-a).
5. In the chapter “Coming Out as Coalitional Gesture?” in *Queer Migration Politics*, Chávez conducts an astute analysis of the different conditions of visibility for queer and migrant people. She explores the risks and stakes associated with various modes of coming out (as queer, undocumented, or both) while envisioning possibilities of resistance beyond the dominant paradigm of visibility (2013, 79-111).
6. Although Daisy does not excuse Black and brown settlers from the violence of Native dispossession, he applies the term “illegal immigrants” specifically to white settlers



(11:41-11:56). We maintain that settlers of color, including those who are undocumented and claiming *mestizaje* or even Indigeneity, are also complicit in and benefit from U.S. settler colonialism and Native land theft.

7. The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) is a U.S. legislative proposal that aims to grant permanent residency to undocumented young adults who arrived in the United States as minors, if they demonstrate good moral character and have satisfied higher education, military service, or employment requirements (American Immigration Council 2019).
8. Our Families Count's organizational partners include, for example, GLAAD and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. For the comprehensive list of organizations that endorsed Our Families Count, see *Windy City Times*, "Our Families Count to Join Census Bureau at Creating Change" (2010).
9. The Transgender Youth Program at the Children's Hospital Los Angeles is now called The Center for Transyouth Health and Development.
10. For example, Our Families Count's video, "We All Count," was produced by the U.S. Census Bureau and funded by UCLA's Williams Institute. "We All Count" features a montage of LGBT community leaders speaking about the importance of census participation interwoven with a music video by a band called Good Asian Drivers (United States Census Bureau 2010b).

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