



The Georgia Review

Census

Communis

2020

Dear educator:

Please consider adopting our special spring 2020 census issue for a course text. Participating in this decennial event is one of perhaps only two basic acts of American democracy, and the central debate of the 2020 census—“The Citizenship Question”—emphasizes all the more how much this often-overlooked event can teach us about what it means to be a citizen of our country.

So, in honor of this year’s census, we published an issue that gives writers, scholars, and community activists space to think about the census. Our education rate is \$10 an issue, and each adoption comes with a free desk copy. Teach your students the importance of the census, while discussing the political history, structure, and ethos around the census and its debates throughout the years—all by way of imaginative and expository writing of the highest quality. Classes from Israel to our backyard, here at the University of Georgia, have already used the issue. Here is a robust conversation eager to welcome you and your students. If you have questions about, or are interested in, using this or any other GR issue in your classroom, please contact Marketing and Outreach Manager, Sarah A. Jordan, at sarah.jordan@uga.edu.

Gerald Maa
Editor

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From Ralph Eubanks, for our forum:

My family has been confounding census workers for nearly a century. In the 1920 census the taker in Washington County, Alabama, documented my white grandfather, Jim Richardson, living with my black grandmother, Edna, in a household with three “mulatto” children, while the 1930 census categorized the seven Richardson children as “negro”—my mother being the youngest of those seven children—and my white grandfather as negro as well. Since he had chosen to live with a black woman as the head of their household, he became black in the eyes of the census taker, just as my mother’s identity shifted in our living room forty years later. My grandmother, on the other hand, was not listed as the wife of my grandfather but as “cook,” perhaps an offhanded way of making a judgment about what was then considered an illicit and illegal relationship. It goes without saying that racial and ethnic identity in the United States has never been so fluid that my blond and blue-eyed grandfather would be perceived as “negro” by any census taker in 1930s Alabama.

From the essay “Do Migrants Dream of Blue Barrels?” by Raquel Gutiérrez

Humane Borders maintains a system of water stations in the Sonoran Desert on routes used by migrants making the perilous journey to the north mostly by foot. Each station has its own name: Green Valley (Pecan Orchard), Elephant Head, Rocky Road, K-9, Cemetery Hill, Soberanes, Mauricio Farah, and Martinez Well.

[. . .]

As soon as we got to the water station I may have quietly gasped at the sight of concrete blocks, a quartet of two-by-four wood planks, and a fifty-five-gallon plastic blue barrel sitting stoutly but bravely above the desiccated arroyo. These objects in any other home improvement configuration might not have inspired such deference, but it was like seeing Stonehenge in real life—or rather seeing these water stations gave me the same feeling when I saw Stonehenge as a high school sophomore. That there is so much life beyond the little world you’re trying to escape from—we’re all trying to leave something behind and go towards something better and there shouldn’t be any guilt or fault in that desire. These water stations are myth come to life, having heard about them in activist circles, a border fable if you will—friends from back home in Southern California who have come out to the desert to do humanitarian work right in the trenches, a newer ground zero located in the Southwest, seeing the danger firsthand, seeing the danger abstracted. This severity. Our national border policies producing the need for these rebel barrels. Suddenly I don the beige mask of humanitarianism, sunburnt pink on my brown skin.

From the short story "The Citizenship Question, or, The Actors of Dearborn" by Ghassan Zeineddine

Before arriving at Uncle Sam's house on the corner of Yinger and Gould Streets, Youssef Bazzi had been canvassing the neighborhoods in East Dearborn for over a month, knocking on doors throughout the day and late into the night, despite the heat or rain. His new job as census taker afforded him flexible hours, and at this point in his life, he preferred to be outdoors. He was thirty-one, and although tall and slim, he had grown a small belly since he had started address canvassing in early August. He blamed his extra weight on the neighborhoods.

East Dearborn was predominately Arab, and among the Lebanese population, one of the biggest families was the Bazzis. Youssef was born and raised in the area and knew most of the people on each block, at least by face. Whenever a resident, quite often a fellow Bazzi, saw Youssef standing on their porch with his ID badge dangling from a lanyard around his neck, a census-issued laptop in his hand, and his census-issued briefcase hanging from his shoulder, they quickly invited him inside, sat him down in the living room, and brought him a glass of soda or lemonade mixed with orange-blossom water, followed by a salty snack or perhaps a dessert and a cup of Turkish coffee. If it was around lunchtime or dinner, he was fed, and fed well. If Youssef had refused the food he would have insulted his fellow Dearbornites.

From "A Hundred and A Piece, a Leaky Citizenship Form" by Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart

All over state failure sparks citizen whiplash. It's smoky dark and the targets fight back with rocks, bows and arrows against water cannons, rubber bullets, tear gas and guns. Liberal citizenship was supposed to be soothing, a blanky of belonging. It promised a thundershirt of a progress arc, a map moving toward a timespace where all the suffering was necessary, just life, and arbitrary, shit happens. It was supposed to be a right, not something earned, allowing strangers to feel a tie toward each other made of matter other than an electric fence. Now people commit to suicide by cop—writing wills and final notes before they take to the streets. They're writers refusing to be bribed by concessions because they know it's like saying I'm sorry after a fight when the awful structure continues.

From "This Was a Lie, the Goal Was to Erase Native Populations" by Joy Harjo

Do not return,
We were warned by one who knows things
You will only upset the dead.
They will emerge from the spiral of little houses
Lined up in the furrows of marrow
And walk the land.
There will be no place in memory
For what they see
The highways, the houses, the stores of interlopers
Perched over the blood fields
Where the dead last stood.
And then what, you with your words
In the enemy's language,
Do you know how to make a peaceful road
Through human memory?
And what of angry ghosts of history?
Then what?
. . .
Don't look back.