

## *Rumi Nations*

by Nicky Enright

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(Guest Editor Julie Chae)



Globe # 5, Nicky Enright

If you say I'm naïve, I'll say you're cynical, but I believe art can be a powerful force for progressive change. And by progressive I don't mean 80s rock; I'm talking true forward motion. I say art *can be* a powerful force because most often it is not. The poet Adrienne Rich, in her '97 [letter](#) refusing the National Medal of the Arts wrote, "Art means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of power which holds it hostage."



[Inflammatory](#), Nicky Enright, 2011, Fire hoses, wall painting, remixed fire extinguisher, original matches in plexi box, pedestal, 3-minute audio + video loop

Personally, I wouldn't say it means *nothing* - art could be a marvelous decoration for the dinner table of power that holds it hostage. I can dig it sometimes. But beyond the decorative, what most inspires me is art that challenges the viewer and implies change. If one possible job description for the contemporary artist is mirror-holder that shows society a reflection of itself, then it should be an accurate and complete mirror. It shouldn't just reflect the good times at the dinner table of power.



[Mirror Ball](#), Nicky Enright, 2008, acrylic on 22"-diameter mirror ball, chain, motor, floor light

Especially not when we have such desperate need for radical change. The human family is a dysfunctional one: we pigeonhole, marginalize, and exploit our members into limited roles; we split into hostile factions and fight all the time; we disrespect and bite the hand that feeds us. We need what any dysfunctional family needs: therapy! I don't mean "art therapy," where the public can use art for individual benefit, but some form of analysis that an artist uses for *public* benefit. Much of my favorite art functions this way, and I like the notion of the contemporary artist as analyst, encouraging breaks from inadequate traditions, exposing detrimental patterns, and seeking the way forward. That's a meaningful role for an artist to play.

One aspect of society I attempt to reflect in my art is our wildly irrational and deeply damaging obsession with race. To this end I recently created an artist's book called "Race through the Census" that shows the racial portion of every U.S. government-issued census form from 1790 to the present. My book is only 23-pages long, since the census happens only every 10 years, but it presents this nation's shifting but extensive fixation

1790

1<sup>st</sup> U.S. Census . . . Handwritten

|           |          |                        |        |       |
|-----------|----------|------------------------|--------|-------|
| Heads 219 | Families | All other free persons | Slaves | Total |
|-----------|----------|------------------------|--------|-------|

Heads of Families

FREE WHITE MALES of 16 years & upward incl. HoF

FREE WHITE MALES under 16 yrs.

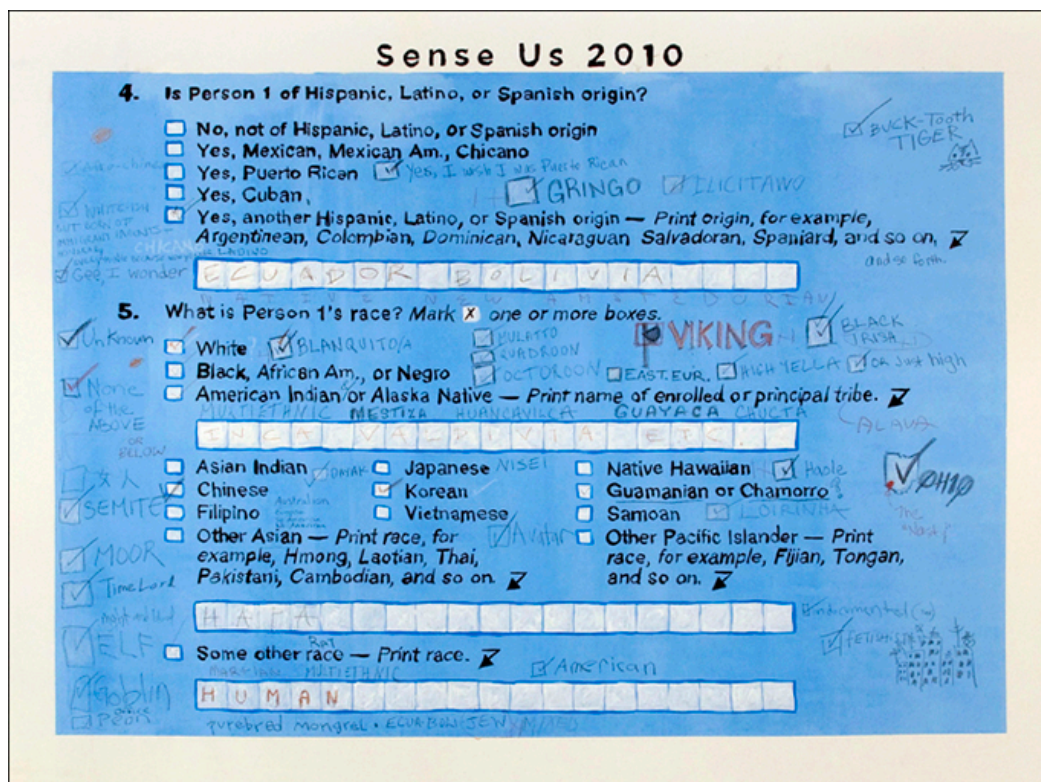
incl. HoF

Slave

The first few census forms tallied only "free persons" and "slaves." But subsequently, the questions twist and turn and churn and turn back: Octoroons and [Quadroons](#); Mexicans are white, no, they're their own race; no, they're white again (Latinos, or is it Hispanics, they're so confusing); all Asians are Chinese; no, some are Korean, Filipinos; colored people, mulattoes, Negroes, blacks, and Blacks with a capital B. And what exactly does it mean to check "white?" It's fascinating, if disturbing stuff. The 23rd census form, in 2010, listed 21 races, including the [Chamorro](#) race, as well as the option to specify "some other race," thereby allowing you to invent additional races. And why not? The whole thing is ludicrous anyway. Try listing 21 races. You couldn't? Well the U.S. government could, and just did it.

In 2010 I began a piece called "[\*Sense Us 2010\*](#)," a large, interactive wall painting where viewers participated in completing, and manipulating the race questions on the census form. I plan to remake this work with every census, continuing the work of analyzing and highlighting the official madness.





[Sense Us 2010](#), Nicky Enright, 2010, interactive wall painting, dimensions variable, photo: Cary Whittier

I consider myself post-race, which is different from [post-racial](#): the fantasy that the election of Barack Obama signaled an end to the era of racial discrimination. Post-race simply means that I have outgrown the notion of race and refuse to be defined by it going forward. It feels great. The bogus concept of race has had nothing but appalling effects. It is a cruel fallacy and also clearly unsustainable. For example, if my 1-year-old son could talk, he might say: "I'm a Black and White, South-Native-American Latino, American-Ecuadorian-Swiss-Peruvian, Catholic, Celtic, Jew." And if he someday reproduced with a woman as mixed as he, what paragraph would their children need to memorize? It is significant that from a scientific perspective there's only one race, and we are all related.

You may have noticed I added countries to my son's racial list. That's because national identity is another mirror I raise, this time to reflect the state of the international community. And there are similarities between racial and national identities; starting with the way these identifications can become markers of self. Last I checked the U.S. Department of State recognized [195](#) "independent states," not including the 50 states in the country known as the United States of America). As with race, things can get immediately perplexing. What exactly is a *state*? As an analyst, I submit to you that it is a *state* of mind.

Regardless of how we define nation-states, there are a whole lot of them, and they're always changing. Although some borders are geographic, many have no *raison d'être*. For example, despite the fact that I favor Ecuadorian *ceviche*, I don't see why Ecuador and Peru need to be different countries. They share history, geography, languages, and

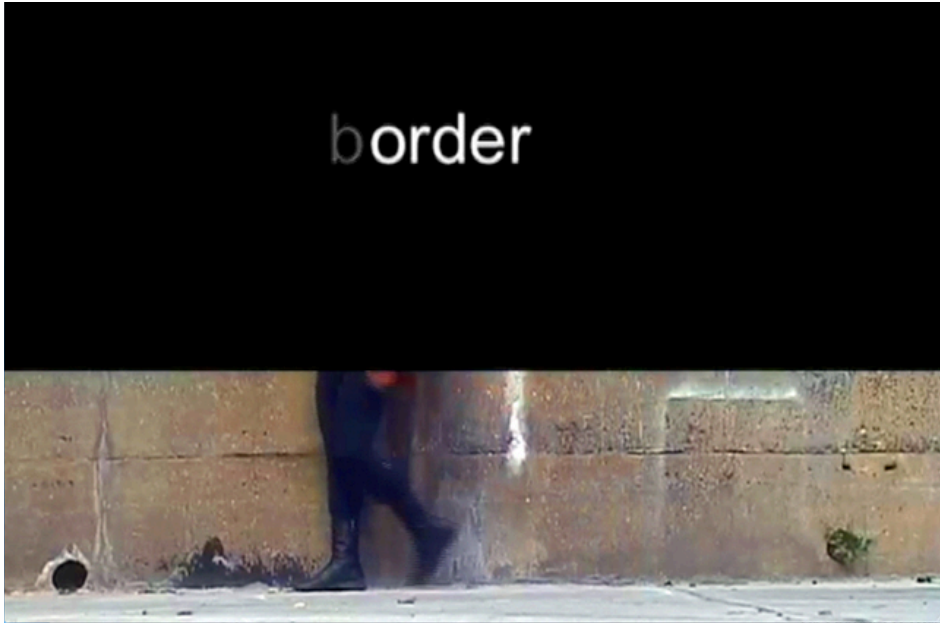
cultures. Yet the fictitious line between them has been the source of recurring armed disputes, such that the border varies depending on whether you look at an Ecuadorian or Peruvian map. As with race, the borderlines may be imagined, but the mayhem they produce is real.



[The Free Flag](#), Nicky Enright, 2012, 5'x8' flag on 30' outdoor flagpole

Countries treat their own citizens like detainees who, with good behavior, have the potential of a furlough. Even if you manage the cost of travel (and good luck with that if you're going from a "developing" to a "developed" nation), and you are permitted to leave your country (by securing a passport), and permitted to enter another (again, good luck if you're "developing"), strict limits on how long you can stay and severe penalties for overstaying will be imposed on you. Once your visa runs out your whole being becomes illegal and you become an "alien." This is especially bizarre since countries espouse rhetoric like, "land of the free."

These things keep me up at night, perhaps because of my multi-mixed heritage and progeny. So I examine from different angles and deepen my questions. Plus I suffer from an acute case of the human desire to overstep borders. From my perspective, as one of many artists whose practice may include traditional media, video, installation, music, social practice, DJ-ing, research, teaching, and writing, it seems borders are there precisely to be transgressed. This is visible in terms of medium in my work, since I do whatever the art requires me to do without worrying about categories; my art is often *about* restrictive categories and the borders between them. The transgression of boundaries is a central component of my life and art.



[\*Rights of Passage\*](#), (video still), Nicky Enright, 2010, silent video installation, 3.5 minutes

I was born in 1971, arguably along with post-modernism, which began tearing down all sorts of boundaries and fantasies about “purity.” If I wasn’t post-race, I might say that I am half-American and half-Ecuadorian, half-white and half-black/Native-South-American, half-Jewish and half-Catholic. That's a lot of halves. I speak four languages and am learning a fifth. I have two citizenships; my sister has three; my son, four. If nationality is a state of mind stemming from an accident of birth, and race a fabrication, and religions and languages available for adopting, then how might I define myself? A whole new world opens up with a broad and profound panorama of human identity, and global citizenship beckons.

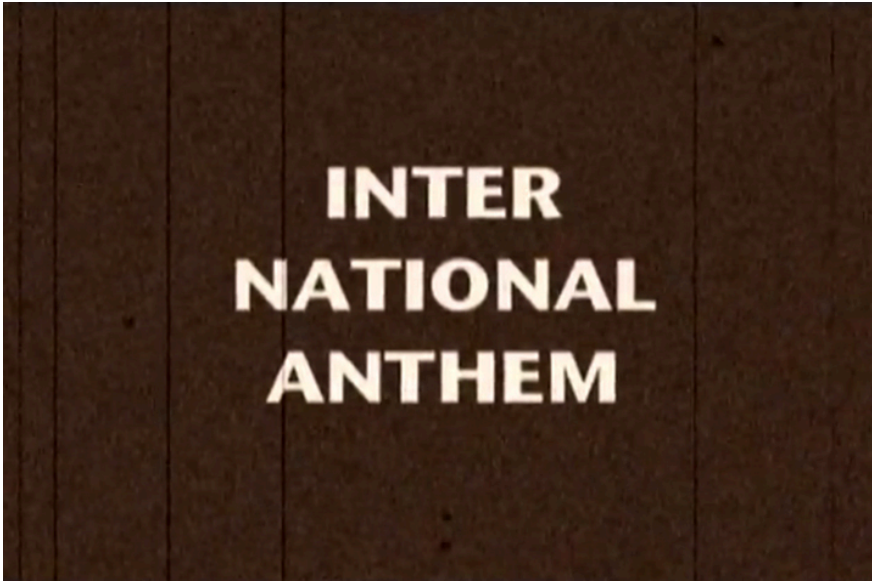
An example of how I grapple with these concepts in my work is the [\*Globo\*](#), a universal currency I created by fusing the legal tender of over twenty-five countries. It is a gallery installation of large, framed prints and a money case, but it also consists of actual bills that I distribute and “spend” in the real-world economy, sparking disbelief and debate. The *Globo* is therefore an intervention into the economy; it confronts the stark inequalities of a globalized labor force by making an international minimum wage theoretically possible. The piece functions as a money remix, clearly informed by my activity as a [world-music DJ](#).





[The Globo](#), Nicky Enright, 2008-present, printed bills in frames, money case, pedestal, real bills & intervention, dimensions variable

Similarly, my video [Inter National Anthem](#) comprises every national anthem from every nation. It functions like a public service announcement that probes the global context of nations. During my investigation into the archetype of anthems I was amazed to discover that every anthem is in the style of classical, European music. While this characteristic enabled me to combine them all seamlessly, it demonstrates the persistent legacy of western domination. This video explores how national identity can be represented through sound (anthems) and colors and shapes (flags). Under scrutiny it can seem absurd to define oneself with broad stripes and bright stars. The fact that these generic symphonies and trite geometric abstractions can have patriotic emotional impact, on full display at the Olympics, shows just how entrenched the theory and practice of invented borders is.



[Inter National Anthem](#), (video stills), Nicky Enright, 2008, audio collage, 10-minute video projection

Moreover, my practice interrogates fundamental systems of classification that have not worked out particularly well: the fabrication of nationhood, the invention and arbitrariness of borders, the construct of race and the effect of all these on identity. I explore the intertwining of these mythologies, and the legitimate, philosophical question: “Who am I?” I challenge conventional notions of origin, belonging, and boundaries, and ultimately strive to transform the means of defining ourselves. I hope to add my meditations on individuality, immigration, economics, and global citizenship to current dialogues on these loaded matters accountable for so much trouble in the world. I want to think outside the checkbox while listening to a global soundtrack that flows across borders like air. Like [this](#):



[The Border Mix](#), Nicky Enright (DJ Lightbolt), 2011, 70-minute DJ mix

----All images courtesy the artist except where noted.



----[Nicky Enright](#) is an artist, educator, and DJ whose multimedia work explores the construction of nationhood and identity, the theory and practice of borders, the intersection of image and sound, and the way language functions. He has received various awards including an apexart residency to Bangkok, Thailand. He has a BFA from The Cooper Union, an MFA from Hunter College, and he is currently exhibiting in *Dimensions Variable: Multiracial Identity* at [Rush Arts](#), and *Cashing Out* at [NURTUREart](#), both in NYC. Born in Guayaquil, Ecuador, he lives and works in the Bronx, NY.