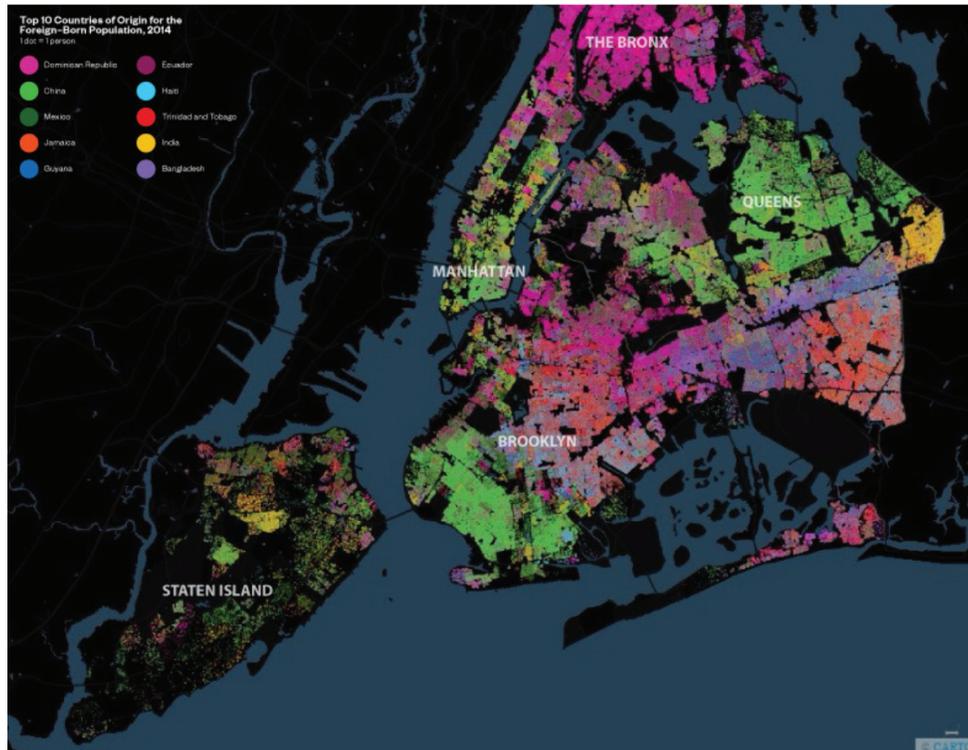


'Who We Are' – NYC really needs you to be counted, for the Census

by Sujeet Rajan



NEW YORK – Come April, 2020, it would be time for the new Census. That Census data, taken once every 10 years since 1790, would become prime tool to better understand New York City and its dense, chaotic mosaic of some 8.5 million inhabitants, spread over five boroughs, further broken up into 245 neighborhoods, where over 800 languages are spoken – making it the most linguistically diverse and interesting city in the world.

In anticipation of and to spread awareness of the gargantuan Census effort to ensure proper distribution of critical federal funds for essential services, the Museum of the City of New York opened a new exhibition, 'Who We Are: Visualizing NYC By The Numbers', which will go on till the summer of next year.

The multimedia show in the exhibition features works by cutting edge contemporary artists, designers, and researchers -alongside rare archival objects and documents, maps and photographs – and explores, celebrates, and underscores the power of the population count and demographics in understanding the past, present, and potential future of New York City.

According to Whitney Donhauser, Ronay Menschel Director and President of the Museum of the City of New York, the 'Who We Are' exhibition is "a way to highlight the importance of the upcoming census – including what's at stake in terms of ensuring fair political representation and sufficient funding for education, infrastructure, and social programs. That said, our hope is that by featuring contemporary art and presenting the data in a visual way, we can humanize and decipher the swirl of information and help everyone better understand our city and its residents."

According to the NY Census website, the decennial count is used to determine New York City's fair share of \$650 billion in federal funds for public education, public housing, infrastructure, and more — as well as the number of seats it gets in Congress.

In the 2010 Census, the city's self-response rate was less than 62%, compared to the national average of 76%. In some neighborhoods, self-response rates were as low as 35%. This means New York City has historically been undercounted, and the new exhibition hopefully will spread a bit more awareness about the critical importance of the census count.

The 'Who We Are' exhibition has fascinating information, including 'Rank of the Most Populous Cities at Each Census: 1790-1890, 1898', one of several charts that were seminal in the history of data visualization, showing the relative rank of US cities from 1790 to 1890 — a period of rapid population growth and urbanization. There is also a copy of the 2020 Census form, which will be shared with American households beginning in March, sans the Citizenship question which the Trump administration tried hard to get inserted.

Many of the works in the exhibition aim to uncover unusual or unexpected insights and to do so with explicitly political or activist intent. Some of the contributors focus on how race is defined and inscribed in the economic and political landscape, or the degree to which immigration has shaped the city, two issues which reflect the political discourse of the time. Others draw attention to the extremes of income inequality in New York, one of the richest cities on earth, including an interactive piece which has higher volume of music as a subway train on a map passes through a more affluent neighborhood.

The art pieces include two works by Ekene Ijeoma 'Wage Islands (2019)', an interactive sculpture that addresses the economic inequities of New York City, in which geographic "islands" of affordability become less isolated and the landscape of the city more contiguous for those with higher incomes; and A Counting (2019) — a crowdsourced audio piece and listening station highlighting people counting in the 100+ languages of NYC from Armenian to Yiddish, giving particular weight to those that are endangered

There is R. Luke Dubois's 'A More Perfect Union: New York City (2019)', a map of the self-descriptive words used to in dating site profiles, with each part of the city represented by the work used more commonly there than anywhere else.

A piece by Pedro Cruz, John Wihbey, and Felipe Shibuya — 'Simulated Dendrochronology of Immigration to New York City, 1840-2017 (2019)', visualizes decades of immigrant arrivals as growing tree rings, which gradually accrete cell by cell, each of which corresponds to immigrants' geographic origins.

There is also 'Powers of Ten: Census Edition (2019)', a map by Jia Zhang, that applies the narrative construct of exponential scaling to census data in order to give meaning to the relative scale of the geographies and demographics inherent in the data. A crowdsourced data visualization experiment, designed by Giorgia Lupi, an information designer whose work takes a humanistic approach to data, allows visitors to participate in a survey.

There are two outputs from the survey: a button emblazoned with the user's unique data portrait will be printed in the Museum's shop and redeemable through a code from the iPad survey; secondly, a website version of the data visualization projected in the gallery will allow those at home to track the data inputted and this collective illustration of users' data portraits.

New York City's Chief Demographer Joseph Salvo puts it succinctly when he points out that the Census information is required so the city is "able to provide people with access to services to incorporate them into the city's fabric, because the more we incorporate our newcomers and our domestic migrants, the better off the city will be for the long haul. This is what makes the city special, our ability to take all people from all over the world, from all over the nation, and somehow they become New Yorkers. We incorporate them into our labor force, we incorporate them civically into our communities, and what we end up with is a special kind of chemical demographic reaction which produces what we call New York City, and it's truly a situation where the total is greater than the sum of the parts."



Image from a new multimedia exhibition on the importance of the census which opened at the Museum of the City of New York, "Who We Are: Visualizing NYC By The Numbers". Photo: Museum of the City of New York

New York City, which accounts for over 40% of the population of New York state (approximately 23.6 million), has over the last decade been growing faster than the region, and continues to be by far the leading metropolitan gateway for legal immigrants admitted into the United States. While English remains the most widely spoken language, there are areas in the outer boroughs in which up to 25% of people speak English as an alternate language, or have limited or no English language fluency. The city's demographics, however, still has White population as majority, at 42.78%, followed by the Black or African American: 24.32%; with other race: 15.12% and Asians comprising of 14.00%.

The Brooklyn-based nonprofit Center for Popular Democracy Action and the city of Newburgh, New York, accused the government last Tuesday of arbitrarily, capriciously and irrationally slashing resources to count blacks, Hispanics, immigrants, the homeless and other members of "hard-to-count" communities, reported Reuters. The nonprofit represents workers, minorities and immigrants.