

I, too, am America

By [Shana L. Haines](#)

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I was born in California. One side of my family immigrated to the United States in the early 17th century. The other side of my family arrived on tightly packed ships filled with misery and tears. We have been American for a long time.

Yet, it wasn't until a cool night in November 2008 that I felt a sense of belonging. Barack Obama's victory felt like a personal victory, an acceptance of sorts. I was not naïve enough to believe, as some proclaimed, that we arose that morning in a country with a deeply flawed racial history and went to bed post-racial, unified, and free. But for an evening, [I, too, sang America](#).

Like many Americans of color, I have been told to go back where I came from or that I if I don't like it here, I can leave. Most of this moving advice has come from white, self-proclaimed Christian men. This is in keeping with the American tradition of the violence of Manifest Destiny, colonialism, finders-keepers, and the expulsion of "savages" under the guise of civilization and proselytizing.

Again, like many Americans of color, I am not viewed as a full citizen. Anh Hua, who teaches women's studies at San Diego State University, [defines](#) a citizen as someone who has been determined to have the right to be in a space. Those like me, deemed to be outsiders or strangers, are policed or excluded through physical and ideological boundaries that make it clear that the "stranger" does not belong. These ideological boundaries dehumanize and further estrange people from each other, resulting in extrajudicial violence and justifications of the deaths of unarmed black men, women, and children. "Why did you shoot me?" asked Levar Jones. "Why did you shoot me?" asked Charles Kinsey. "Why did you shoot me?" asks Tamir Rice. "Why did you shoot me?" asks Yvette Smith. I feared for my life. You reached for my gun. You're a thug. You're a beast. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know you.

A more perfect union cannot be based on a principle of exclusion, but American citizenship has always been just that. Frederick Douglass's [speech](#) "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" addresses the hypocrisy of our stated American values

of freedom, equality, and liberty at a time when African Americans were excluded from full participation in American democracy. Renato Rosaldo, in “Cultural Citizenship, Inequality, and Multiculturalism,” claims that citizenship has never meant that all are equal. Hierarchies created by race and gender have always excluded some bodies from democracy. Thus, brown female bodies, like mine, are coded with prejudices resulting in socio-political exclusion, policing, and second-class citizenship. When sexual orientation is added as a layer of identity, those bodies are pushed even further to the margins of citizenship and belonging.

Bans on making anti-discrimination laws, discrimination in business practices, and “love the sinner, hate the sin” are all attempts to erase LGBT people’s identities. In the aftermath of the Pulse Night Club shooting, discussions about violence against LGBT people was subsumed by gun control rhetoric and Islamophobia. Many people expressed indignation that the LGBT community took exception to having our identity erased. “We’re all Americans!” was the claim. But we weren’t all Americans when you were trying to overturn my marriage, I want to say. We weren’t all Americans when voted down anti-discrimination bans. We weren’t all Americans when you wanted to allow businesses to refuse service to us. [Melissa Harris-Perry writes](#), “naming citizens solely by their national identity ignores how identities like gender, race, class and sexual orientation profoundly shape what it means to be an American.”

It has been a long time since I felt like I did that November night in 2008. In the current climate, I am unsure if I will ever feel that way again. What I do know is this: until we can embrace all citizens, we will never have one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward Carson](#) and [Beth Shalom Hessel](#).*