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COLORISM BEFORE AND AFTER THE ONE DROP RULE

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ABSTRACT

The ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* changed the United States from a color-focused society to a race-focused society and stripped the privileged formal status from mulattos. Black identity was flattened to what we know today: a collective identity with rampant color stratification. While research on colorism has expanded, we need to understand how contemporary colorism evolved from the systems of the past. I use Census microdata from 1870 and 1920 and regression analysis to examine colorism before and after the one-drop-rule. I reveal that colorism worsened after the one-drop-rule, and mulattos tried even harder to preserve their distinct identity.

INTRODUCTION

If we aggregate the body of race research, we learn race and racialization operate on at least two broad levels: social and institutional. The former describes how people use race and define race in their daily lives. These strands of research examine how people learn to see and understand race and the role it plays in their lives and life chances (eg Reece, 2019; Waters, 1990). The latter describes a top-down version of race, where the categories and meanings are defined by institutions—typically the state—and codified through policy and other legal means such as court rulings (Robbins, 2000). These categories and meanings typically reflect the interests of the state, often its desire to include or exclude groups of people (Robbins, 2000). These two manifestations of race overlap but are often in tension with one another as groups vie to make to make them align. Groups try to make their identities match the categories offered by the state through a combination of changing their identities and challenging the state-sponsored categories (Saperstein and Penner 2014). The state, on the other hand, seeks alignment by alternately changing the available categories to match how people identify and forcing people to shoehorn their identities into existing categories (Robbins, 2000).

Today, the tensions between social and institutional race are most prominent in the cases of two groups: Hispanics/Latinos and Middle Easterners & North Africans (MENA). Both groups struggle to align their social identities with the categories offered to them institutionally,

particularly on the Census (Mathews et al., 2017). Hispanics/Latinos are forced to select from an awkward “ethnic identity” question on the Census that does not capture the complexities of how they are racialized in the United States compared to Latin America (Leeman, 2018). MENA groups are forced to identify as white on the Census despite insisting that they are not racialized as white in their social lives (Maghbouleh, 2019). While Black Americans appear to have reached a high level of alignment between their social and institutional identities, that was not always the case. Black Americans underwent a decades-long process where their racial identities, both social and institutional, were highly contested, leading to prominent changes in how Black Americans were identified then to how they are identified today.

Black Americans’ apparent racial alignment is an artifact of the “one-drop rule.” “One-drop rule” is a colloquialism for the formal and informal expectation that people with any Black ancestry will identify as Black. However, this mandate was not always in place, and since the 1700s color and colorism have complicated racial identification for Black Americans. But the transition from a complex system of identification based on color to a simple system based on ancestry remains understudied. This transition featured involvement from several layers of government—the Supreme Court, state legislatures, the Census Bureau—and eventually changed how people identified day-to-day. While a few scholars explored how and why this transition emerged (eg, Reece, 2021), fewer have examined its immediate consequences. Specifically, I am concerned with whether these institutional changes in the approach to identifying Black Americans created material changes in color inequality and to what extent the people targeted by these changes adjusted their identities to match new institutional mandates.

The institutional shift from color-based identification to race based identification can be neatly demarcated by the infamous Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. While curriculums across the country present *Plessy* as the “separate but equal” case, it was much more than that. The ruling in *Plessy* put the death knell in formal distinctions of color among Black Americans and signaled the start of the “one drop rule.” Before *Plessy* Black people were subject to fine grained distinctions based on their color and perceived Black ancestry. While many of these terms were informal, “mulatto,” which describes the mixed-race progeny of a Black and white union, was a formal distinction and remained on the Census for nearly a century. After *Plessy* state legislatures passed laws that removed the relevance of color to the formal identification of people with Black ancestry. In the eyes of the law everyone with Black ancestry became equally “Black.”

However, contemporary research shows color distinctions remain prominent among Black Americans even in the absence of formal identifications such as the “mulatto” category. Lighter skinned Black people continue to enjoy numerous advantages over their darker skinned counterparts (eg. Monk, 2014) despite their congruent racial identifications. This color stratification mirrors that of the pre-Civil War and immediate postbellum periods where light skinned “mulatto” Black Americans received benefits and positive treatment systematically denied to their darker skinned mates (Bodenhorn, 2011; Bodenhorn & Ruebeck, 2007; Frazier, 1930; Green & Hamilton, 2013; Gullickson, 2010; Reece, 2018a, 2018b; Saperstein & Gullickson, 2013; Schweninger, 1989, 1990). While research that examines contemporary colorism continues to grow and research that examines 19th century colorism reveals important historical details, little empirical research, examines the transition from one system of color to the other.

Fortunately, the U.S. Census was slow to adopt the changes to the Black category and continued to include “mulatto” in its collection efforts after the ruling in *Plessy* spurred states to pass their own versions of one-drop-rules. This institutional lag offers us an opportunity to investigate color and colorism immediately before the transition to the one-drop-rule and immediately after. Even though state legislatures forced people of marginal Black ancestry to identify as Black and subjected all those people to racial segregation, the Census continued to collect data that highlighted color distinctions. I use this data and regression analysis to examine whether the institutional shift initiated by *Plessy* (1) changed the material stratification between lighter and darker skinned Black people and (2) changed how people sought to identify their children. Ultimately, my results suggest color stratification did not change much in the wake of the transition *and* people became even less likely to identify their children as Black.

THE CONTEMPORARY STATE OF COLORISM

Colorism describes a hierarchal system that emerges from a system of racial stratification whereby nonwhite people are stratified based on phenotypic closeness to whiteness even within the same racial group. That means people of color who look more stereotypically white—predominately with lighter skin but also lighter eyes, straighter hair, thinner noses and lips—receive life advantages relative to those in their racial group who look more stereotypically “ethnic.” While globally colorism emerged through a variety of disparate histories, among Black people in the United States colorism reflects cemented stereotypes about phenotype and intelligence. Historically, white people believed that lighter skinned Black people had more “white blood” and were thus smarter and more industrious (Frazier, 1930). These ideas became so hegemonic that they shaped social policy and continue to stratify Black Americans (I’ll elaborate on this process in the next section).

Colorism touches almost every aspect of Black American life regardless of age, and in almost every case lighter skinned Black Americans demonstrate advantages relative to their darker skinned counterparts. Lighter skinned Black adults report higher incomes (Elizabeth et al., 2007; Goldsmith et al., 2006, 2007; Hersch, 2006; Keith & Herring, 1991; Kreisman & Rangel, 2015; Monk, 2014; Reece, 2020), and some studies even show no statistically significant differences between the wages of light skinned Black adults and white adults despite the considerably lower wages of medium and dark-skinned Black adults (Goldsmith et al., 2006). Lighter skinned Black adults and children also report better physical and mental health outcomes and longer life expectancies (Diette et al., 2015; Laidley et al., 2019; Louie, 2019; Monk 2015; Monk, 2021; Perreira et al., 2018; Stewart et al., 2018; Uzogara, 2019). Similarly, adults suffer fewer dangerous and violent encounters with law enforcement (Jandel et al., 2017), which also extends into other aspects of the criminal justice system. Lighter skinned Black adults receive shorter prison sentences even when controlling for criminal history and other variables (Blair et al., 2004; Finkeldey & Demuth, 2019; King & Johnson, 2016; Monk, 2019; Viglione et al., 2011). Moreover, like the aforementioned study of wages, a study by Traci Burch (2015) shows no statistically significant difference between the prison sentences of light skinned Black adults and white adults, while medium and dark-skinned Black adults receive sentences over 5% longer than both other groups. These disproportionate prison sentences come after a lifetime of disproportionate punishments in other arenas, such as

educational settings, where darker skinned Black American children are punished more and more harshly than lighter skinned Black American children (Hannon et al., 2013), which, in turn, leads to lower educational attainment among darker skinned Black adults (Monk, 2014). And, finally, lighter skinned Black Americans, regardless of age, are viewed as more physically attractive and competent than darker skinned Black Americans (Hannon, 2015; Reece, 2016)).

The forces facilitating color stratification are complex, including a variety of individual, historical, and structural factors. Research shows that darker skinned Black Americans suffer colorism at the hands of both white people and other Black people due to a preference for whiteness that has been baked into our society (Goldsmith et al., 2007). Other scholars suggest that this preference for whiteness and historical social closure strategies intersected with racial policy to pave the way for light skinned Black Americans to achieve upward mobility typically denied to the darker skinned of the race. Specifically, research shows that marriages have been color homogamous for almost two centuries (Bodenhorn, 2006; Monk, 2014; Reece, 2018b), which allowed light skinned Black Americans to concentrate their disproportionate levels of wealth and economic affluence among themselves while systematically denying darker skinned Black Americans access to resources through residential and social exclusion (Meier & Lewis, 1959; Notter & Logan, 2021). As federal legislation brought an end to Jim Crow, giving Black Americans access to opportunities and institutions where they had been excluded, the lighter skinned among them were better poised to seize these opportunities, while the darker skinned got ensnared in the net of mass incarceration.

This widening opportunity gap may also show itself in the rapidly diverging political attitudes of light and dark-skinned Black adults. Studies using data on political and racial attitudes from the 1980s consistently found what they called a “skin color paradox” (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007b). The skin color paradox described the finding that while lighter and darker skinned Black adults exhibited divergent life outcomes their political and racial attitudes were nearly identical. Researchers attributed this paradox to a century of one-drop-rule socialization and Civil Rights activism where Black Americans emphasized their racial unity and deemphasized color differences to combat racial injustice. However, studies using more recent data, from the 2000s, show a political schism between light and dark-skinned Black adults, with the former leaning toward more conservative political attitudes, including embracing more negative stereotypes about Black Americans (Hutchings et al., 2016).

Color and Race before the One-Drop-Rule

As I start this section, I must offer a note on the racial language I use here. The language to discuss race and color in the 19th century can be confusing because while mulattos were considered different from mono-racial Black people, they were still considered Black themselves. This would present some confusion about which group I am referring to when I use the term “Black,” so I present the following solution: when I use “Black” I refer to people who were considered dark skinned and monoracially Black; when I use “mulatto” I refer to people who were considered light skinned, mixed race Black people; and when I wish to refer to them both in the aggregate, I use the term “people of color.”

Prior to the one-drop-rule, color *mattered* in an explicit and legalized way. In fact the Census used the term “color” rather than “race” for the categories that tracked ancestry. While we must certainly consider that at the time people may have considered color and race synonyms, the

conflation of the two ideas betrays the troubles Census officials, legislators, and everyday people experienced when trying to classify people based on their ancestry and appearance.

Across the 19th century, with some exceptions, the dominant opinion among Americans was that interracial procreation created racial hybrids that needed to be distinguished from their component parts. To that end, the Census and other organizations formalized the use of the term “mulatto” to describe the progeny of mixed Black and white parents, while other terms such as “griffe,” “octoroon,” and “quadroon” colloquially described a person’s specific proportion of “Black blood” (Hersch, 2007).

Mulattos were not merely the mixed-race children of Black-white unions, they were their own group, with their own characteristics and eventually their own communities. Not only did they tend to fare better than their supposedly monoracial Black counterparts on metrics such as economic success and manumission (Bodenhorn, 2011; Schweninger, 1989, 1990), but white people also saw them as superior to Black people and likely to ally themselves with white people if given the chance. For example, a legislative report investigating a planned slave revolt in South Carolina in the 1820s read:

Free mulattos are a barrier between our own color and that of the Black and in cases of insurrection are more likely to enlist themselves under the banners of the whites . . . Most of them are industrious, sober, hardworking mechanics, who have large families and considerable property; and so far as we are acquainted with their temper and dispositions of their feelings, abhor the idea of association with the blacks in any enterprise . . . (as cited in Jones, 2000, pp. 1508–1509)

Moreover, people believed this hybridity was easily observable, that they could determine the details of racial ancestry through mere visual observation, and two examples stand out that attest to this point. First is a witness testimony from Arkansas in 1859, where a woman was on trial for possession of a firearm, violating legislation that banned Black people from owning firearms. Her defense rested on her contention that she was not Black and therefore not in violation of the law. The witness sought to affirm her Black ancestry:

Susan is of very light complexion, has straight hair, is slightly swarthy, and has rather thick lips and coarse features. From her appearance, [Turner] is of the opinion that she has a small amount of African blood in her veins—what amount impossible to say, but [he] thinks not more than an eighth or a sixteenth. Her mouth and features, generally, indicate the African blood . . . (as cited in Gross, 1998, p. 104)

Second, a judge in North Carolina in 1859 remarked:

[It does not] require a distinguished comparative anatomist to detect the admixture of the African or Indian with the pure blood of the white race. Any person of ordinary intelligence, who, for a sufficient length of time will devote his attention to the subject, will be able to discover with almost unerring certainty the adulteration of the Caucasian with the Negro or Indian blood. (as cited in Gross, 1998, p. 63)

However, mulattos were not passively cast as different from Black people. Many of them were active participants in socially distancing themselves from their Black counterparts and sought to maintain that distance through establishing their own communities and, when possible, emulating the behavior of affluent white people (Roberts, 2022). They towed a delicate balance of selectively adopting parts of white culture while being careful not to encroach too much on

white space or appear too familiar, lest they risk the ire of more zealous white people—mulattos were still people of color, after all. Occasionally, this emulation even included owning slaves. On the eve of the Civil War, some members of the mulatto elite even tried to maintain their status by aligning themselves with the Confederates (Roberts, 2022).

Despite their worries, the end of the Civil War did not immediately spell the end of mulattos' privileged status. At least one study suggests they could have strengthened their position afterward and suffered fewer of the deleterious consequences of slavery experienced mono-racial Black people (Reece, 2018a). Reconstruction brought new opportunities to people with Black ancestry, and mulattos were most prepared to seize those opportunities. For example, we tend to cheer Reconstruction for offering new political power to Black Americans, but almost every new legislator with Black ancestry was mulatto (Brock, 1974).

Mulattos' grip on the power and opportunities extended to people of color is not entirely surprising, however, as institutional transitions often continue to rely on preexisting modes of thinking and the longer such thinking has persisted, the harder it is to change. Ruef (2014) calls this process emulation, which describes the recreation of "old local knowledge and social relations, repurposes old institutions, and imbues new institutions with old norms, a combination of processes that combines to reconstruct past inequalities. These new, emulated forms of interaction appear similar but not identical to the past but inherit similar power relations. Ultimately this would mean the interactions that governed blacks relative to mulattos may be imported into the post-Emancipation south, thus maintaining the boundaries created during the antebellum years and perpetuating the system of colorism" (Reece 2018a. p. 10). But the end of Reconstruction put mulattos' privileged position—and their very racial category—at risk.

Mulattos' role as an intermediate racial group proved valuable to white people and slavers during the antebellum years. They provided an easy target to buffer the ire aimed at white people from their Black slaves and presumably allies in the case of a slave insurrection or race war. But without slavery to police and control the Black population white people were forced to turn to other methods that threatened the lives mulattos had built over the previous century. Jim Crow laws relied on a strict, dichotomous view of race that mulattos had deftly skirted, but now they found themselves in the crosshairs of new legislation that threatened to cast them as Black and reduce their social status.

Plessy and the Emergence of the One-Drop-Rule

The struggle between mulattos and white people over the former's racial identity came to a head during the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. While primary and secondary schools continue to teach *Plessy* as a case about the inherent inequality of separate accommodations and a challenge to racial inequality, *Plessy* is fundamentally a case about color and mulattos' attempts to preserve the advantages they had accrued.

The case challenged the Separate Car Act of 1890, where the Louisiana state government mandated railways provide separate passenger cars for white and Black passengers. The Black Creole community in New Orleans had thrived on the position that they were neither Black nor white, but something else entirely. However, the legislature added no provisions for such racial ambiguity in the law, which meant they would likely find themselves shut off in the Black passenger cars. With this fear in mind, the community devised a plan to challenge the law

despite protests from the local Black community, who recognized that the creoles and mulattos cared less about racial inequality for its own sake than they did about preserving their own privileged status (Golub, 2005).

The creole community selected Homer Plessy to challenge the legislation. Plessy was born into an affluent free Black family in the early 1860s and looked so white that even the court commented that his “one-eight African blood was not discernable in him” (163 U.S. as cited in Golub, 2005, p. 564). In fact, Plessy looked so white that had he and his lawyer not conspired with a private investigator and a train conductor to have him arrested for sitting in the white train car he probably would have enjoyed his ride without incident (Thomas, 1997). This was precisely the point Plessy and his lawyer wanted to make. Their argument did not hinge on the fact that in a society organized into a racial hierarchy, separate accommodations were necessarily unequal. Instead, they leaned into an argument about racial ambiguity and the value of visually presenting oneself as white regardless of their Black ancestry (Golub, 2005).

The lawyer argued that racial admixture had been the norm in the United States since its inception and that accurately determining the racial ancestry of any individual person was nearly impossible, especially for a busy train conductor. However, rather than using this reasoning to argue that racial classifications and thus separate accommodations were immoral and violated the equal protection clause, they argued that Homer Plessy’s light skin should afford him the privileges of whiteness regardless of his Black ancestry. In fact, they argued Plessy and his peers were denied their rightful property of whiteness by being classified as Black when they looked white.

This argument supported the extant racial hierarchy! Plessy, his lawyer, and his advocates did not seek to overturn or dismantle the racial hierarchy. They fought for their place atop the hierarchy, for their right to upward racial mobility, and to leave monoracial Black people behind. Unfortunately, the argument came too late. In the mid-1800s, legislation and judicial rulings sought to protect people like Plessy, with less than $\frac{1}{4}$ Black ancestry, from being classified as Black and suffering the restrictions placed on Black people at the time. In what came to be known as “Not-A-Negro” laws, states conceded that being perceived as white by the public was enough to legally live as white. In 1835, Justice William Harper even wrote that ““race was ‘not to be determined solely by the distinct and visible mixture of negro blood, but by reputation . . . reception into society, and . . . having commonly exercised the privileges of a white man’” (as cited in Sharfstein, 2013, p. 528). But in a post-slavery United States, such arguments no longer held sway.

The court’s response to Plessy’s arguments signaled a new era for race in the United States, where people would no longer have their value judged proportional to their racial admixture. Instead, any Black ancestry was a permanent stain on people’s ancestry and denied them the privileges and property of whiteness. The majority opinion read:

It is claimed by the plaintiff in error that in any mixed community, the reputation of belonging to the dominant race, in this instance the white race, is property, in the same sense that a right of action or of inheritance, is property. Conceding this to be so . . . we are unable to see how this statute deprives him of, or in any way affects his right to, such property. If he be a white man and assigned to a colored coach, he may have his action for damages against the company for being deprived of his so-called property. Upon the other hand, if he be a colored man and be so assigned, he has been deprived of no property, since he is not lawfully entitled to the reputation of being a white man. (163. U.S. as cited in Golub, 2005, p. 572).

Later in the same opinion, the judge lit the spark that would become the one-drop-rule when he wrote:

The power to assign a particular coach obviously implies the power to determine to which race the passenger belongs, as well as the power to determine who, under the laws of the particular states, is to be deemed a white, and who a colored person. (163. U.S. as cited in Golub, 2005, p. 583)

The ruling empowered states to pass their own laws determining racial classification irrespective of federal racial classifications, where the Census would continue to collect data on mulattos for another 3 decades. Tennessee was the first state to take advantage of the ruling when in 1910 they passed legislation that established a person was Black if they had any Black ancestry. Other southern states followed in the following years and decades. Mississippi passed their law in 1917. North Carolina joined in 1923 and Virginia the next year. Alabama and Georgia came onboard in 1927, with Oklahoma bringing up the rear in 1931 (Brown, 2014).

However, the transition from a color-based system to a race-based system was rocky. Even after the one-drop-rule began to settle across the country, old habits died slow, both socially and institutionally. For example, Alfred Holt Stone, a Mississippi politician, refused to acknowledge that the country could seamlessly collapse Black people and mulattos into a single category, remarking:

The mulatto is not a Negro, and neither written nor social law can make him one. By consent of all parties, including himself, he may be called a Negro. But we can no more make a Negro by such a process than we can alter the life traits and nationality of a Russian peasant by bestowing upon him an English name. The essential fallacy which underline this classification will sooner or later make the latter impossible to maintain. (as cited in Hochschild & Weaver, 2007a, p. 164).

Stone was not alone in his contention, and the national media continued to use the term “mulatto” well into the middle of the 20th century, long after one-drop-rules had settled across the country and even after the Census removed the mulatto category following the 1920 enumeration (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007a).

Moreover, while Jim Crow led to increased residential segregation between white people and people with Black ancestry, simultaneously mulattos became more residentially segregated from Black people. Notter and Logan (2021) show that rates of residential segregation between Black people and mulattos increased significantly between 1880 and 1920. And the researchers found that differences in economic affluence could not account for the segregation, suggesting mulattos, regardless of class, simply attempted to avoid living next to monoracial Black people. While white people were hardening the boundaries between themselves and people of color, mulattos seemingly continued to deploy this and other forms of social closure, like marriage, to distance themselves from Black people (Reece, 2018b). I build on this work to continue to expand our knowledge of the immediate impacts of the institutionalization of the one-drop rule on people with Black ancestry. To that end I propose two interrelated research questions that capture the effect of the shifting racial landscape at two different points in life:

(1) How did occupational stratification between blacks and mulattos in 1870 compare to occupational stratification between blacks and mulattos in 1920?

This question helps us understand whether an institutional change in racial classification led to a corresponding change in the material conditions of the groups involved, particularly, did collapsing blacks and mulattos into a “collective Black” category lead to worsened,

ameliorated, or similar levels of inequality between the two groups. Previous research, like Notter and Logan (2021), and the glut of research elucidating contemporary colorism suggest Black/dark-mulatto/light inequality either persisted or worsened between 1870 and 1920.

(2) How did the racial identification of children based on their parents' racial identifications change between 1870 and 1920?

This question helps us understand whether people succumbed to the new rules governing racial identification or whether they resisted them. With the institutional privileges of mulatto identification stripped away, if people accepted these changes, they would become less likely to identify their children as mulatto. However, if they sought to combat these changes, they might become more likely to identify their children as mulatto or exhibit no change. Research shows light skinned Black Americans continued to practice social distancing from their darker counterparts through exclusive social clubs and the like through the mid-20th century (Bodenhorn, 2006) so I expect that mulatto identification would remain at least as common in 1920 as in 1870.

DATA AND METHODS

My data come from U.S. Census microdata. I use the 1% sample from the 1870 and 1920 Censuses provided by IPUMS USA of the Minnesota Population Center, and I narrowed my sample to address each research question. For my first question, I included every Black or mulatto person over 18 who was in the labor force for a total of 61,522 cases—15,238 from 1870 and 37,613 from 1920. There were no missing data for these cases. For my second research question, I included every Black or mulatto person under 18. I excluded cases where information for both parents was unavailable because my analysis relies on information about both parents. I was left with a total of 54,089 cases—17,735 from 1870 and 36,336 from 1920.

Dependent Variables

I use two dependent variables: occupational score and mulatto racial identification for children.

Occupational score is a continuous variable that provides a numerical value for the prestige of occupations based on a ranking system in 1950. It has been used in historical research like this before (eg. Reece, 2018b). It is not a direct proxy for income, but it offers a way to compare occupations hierarchically, especially over time. The time element is particularly important because this study hinges on our ability to make accurate comparisons across 50 years and occupational score offers the best way to do that. It does not allow us to make income-based evaluations of inequality, but it allows us to compare relative job prestige.

Mulatto identification is a dichotomous variable that signifies that the respondent was identified as mulatto by their parents on that year of the Census. This analysis is possible because IPUMS USA allows users to link respondents to their parents and spouses, typically in the same household.

Focal Independent Variables

I also use two focal independent variables, one for each research question: racial identification and parental ancestry.

Racial identification is a dichotomous variable for whether the respondent identified as Black or mulatto on that Census.

Parental ancestry is a dichotomous variable that identifies the race(s) of the subjects' parents. I use five categories: white-mulatto parentage, mulatto-mulatto parentage, white-Black parentage, mulatto-Black parentage, and Black-Black parentage.

Other Independent Variables

I also included other independent variables to control for various factors that may affect my independent variables: region, age, whether they lived on a farm, literacy, and gender. Region is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent lived in the South. Age is the respondent's age in years. Farm is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent lived on a farm. Literacy is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent could read and write. Gender is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent was a woman. When modeling my second research question, I excluded the literacy value because the models include young children.

See [Table 1](#) for descriptive statistics for the sampled adults and [Table 2](#) for descriptive statistics for the sampled children.

Analytic Strategy

To address my first research question, I used ordinary least squares regression to estimate the effect of mulatto status and year on occupational score. I estimated two models. The first model included variables for mulatto, 1920, age, woman, south, literate, and on farm. In the second model, I added an interaction term for mulatto in 1920 to gauge whether the effect of color changed between 1870 and 1920. I used those models to estimate predicted values for the respondents, then I used a one-way ANOVA to test whether there were statistically significant differences between the mean occupational scores for Black people in 1870 and 1920 and mulattos in those same years. For ease of interpretation, I only present and discuss the predicted occupational scores, but the full model is available in the [Appendix](#).

For my second research question, I used binary logistic regression to estimate the effect of racial parentage on respondents' odds of being identified as mulatto as opposed to Black-only. I, again, estimated two models. The first model included the following variables: white-mulatto parentage, mulatto-mulatto parentage, white-Black parentage, mulatto-Black parentage (I excluded Black-Black parentage as the reference category), 1920, age, woman, south, and on farm. In the second model I added interaction terms for year and parentage to understand whether parental effects changed over time. I used these models to estimate predicted probabilities for the respondents and used a one-way ANOVA to test for statistically significant differences between the mean probabilities for each combination of parentage and year. Again, for ease of interpretation, I only present and discuss the predicted values here, but the full models are available in the [Appendix](#).

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics for Adults in the Labor Force

Variable	BLACK			MULATTO		
	n	Mean	Std Dev	n	Mean	Std Dev
1870						
Occupational Score	15238	11.67	5.49	2064	12.84	6.66
South	15238	0.91	-	2064	0.82	-
Age	15238	33.55	14.47	2064	31.42	13.21
On Farm	15238	0.23	-	2064	0.22	-
Woman	15238	0.31	-	2064	0.312	-
Literate	15238	0.14	-	2064	0.28	-
1920						
Occupational Score	37613	14.21	7.66	6607	14.85	8.96
South	37613	0.82	-	6607	0.80	-
Age	37613	35.70	14.12	6607	34.91	13.95
On Farm	37613	0.41	-	6607	0.36	-
Woman	37613	0.32	-	6607	0.36	-
Literate	37613	0.72	-	6607	0.81	-

TABLE 2
Descriptive Statistics for Children

Parentage	MULATTO CHILDREN		BLACK CHILDREN		MULATTO CHILDREN		BLACK CHILDREN	
	n	Proportion	n	Proportion	n	Proportion	n	Proportion
	1870				1920			
White-Mulatto	2380	0.01	15373	0	6376	0.01	29960	0
Mulatto-Mulatto	2380	0.51	15373	0.004	6376	0.60	29960	0.002
White-Black	2380	0.01	15373	0.003	6376	0.005	29960	0.001
Mulatto-Black	2380	0.35	15373	0.06	6376	0.36	29960	0.04
Black-Black	2380	0.11	15373	0.92	6376	0.03	29960	0.96
Variable	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Other Variables								
South	0.83	-	0.93	-	0.89	-	0.91	-
Age	8.063	6.25	8.72	6.53	9.66	7.05	9.76	6.92
On Farm	0.28	-	0.26	-	0.58	-	0.64	-
Girl	0.51	-	0.49	-	0.49	-	0.49	-

RESULTS

Overall, my results suggest that the one-drop-rule did little to curb colorism among people with Black ancestry.

For research question 1, see [Figure 1](#) for the predicted occupational scores for Black people and mulattos for 1870 and 1920.

That the mean occupational score for both groups is higher in 1920 than in 1870 is unsurprising. In 1870, most people with Black ancestry still performed farm labor, but by 1920 they were migrating to cities and taking advantage of new, if limited, industrial opportunities as the economy expanded. However, color stratification did not dissipate over that time. In fact, it seems to have worsened. While the mean predicted occupational score for mulattos was 3.5% higher than the mean Black score in 1870, by 1920 that difference was 4.8%. Both the differences between groups and the differences between years are statistically significant. Although 3.5% and 4.8% may seem like small-ish differences, we must remember that occupational score does not offer an exact proxy for income, so we cannot be sure of the exact magnitude of associated occupational income differences. With that in mind, instead of fretting about the magnitude of the differences, we should note that color stratification seemed to remain prominent even after the proliferation of the one-drop rule. There is consistent with previous research such as [Notter and Logan \(2021\)](#) which suggests the one-drop did not ameliorate or flatten color differences between blacks and mulattos.

Now, turning to research question 2, see [Figure 2](#) for the predicted values for mulatto identification for 1870 and 1920.

Before reviewing these results, I want to return to [Table 2](#) briefly. The table shows vast disparities between the two groups of children, regardless of year. In both years, over 90% of

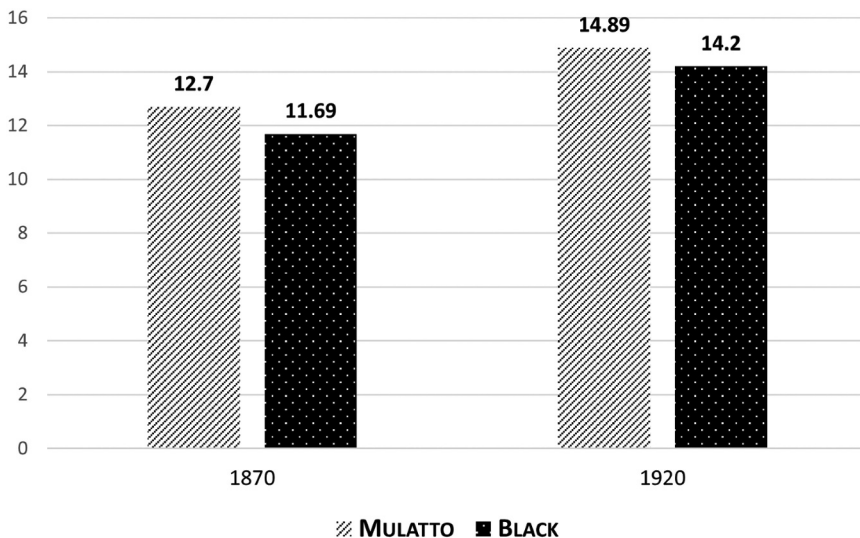


FIGURE 1 Predicted occupational score by color and year.

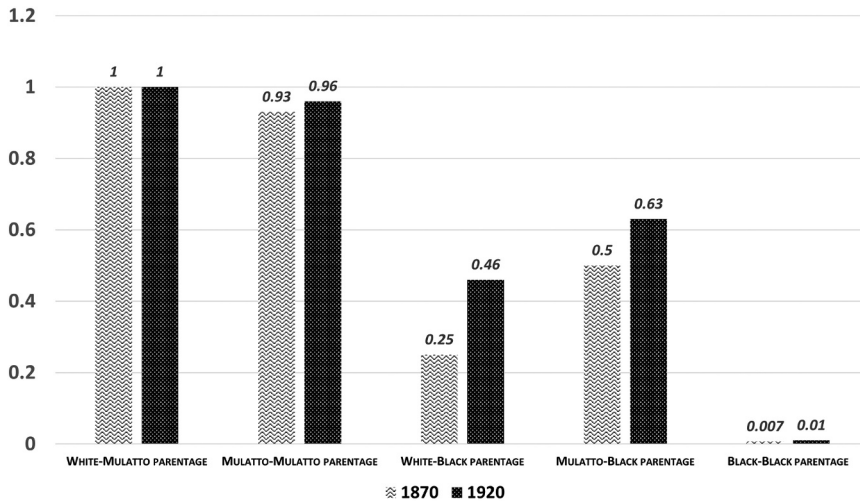


FIGURE 2 Predicted child mulatto identification by parentage and year.

Black children had two Black parents. A much smaller percentage—6% in 1870 and 4% in 1920—had one Black parent and one mulatto parent. A similar but smaller effect is in play for mulatto children. Despite mulatto initially emerging to describe the progeny of Black-white unions, most mulatto children had two mulatto parents—51% in 1870 and 60% in 1920. A smaller percentage—35% in 1870 and 36% in 1920—had one mulatto parent and one Black parent, and some—11% in 1870 and 3% in 1920—had two Black parents. With these numbers in mind, I will focus my results discussion on children of mulatto-Black parents and Black-Black parents because these two categories offer enough cases to make meaningful comparisons. Although most mulatto children have two mulatto parents, the percentage of Black children with two mulatto parents is so small that extrapolating much meaning from that number would be problematic.

Referring again to Figure 2, observe the predicted probabilities of mulatto identification for children with two Black parents on the far right of the figure. In 1870 the odds of the child of two Black parents being identified as mulatto was .007. In 1920 the odds of the child of two Black parents being identified as mulatto was .01. According to my ANOVA this 43% increase is statistically significant. Although the .003% increase may seem miniscule, we must remember Black-Black unions remained the most common union among people of color (2006), and the overall population increased dramatically between 1870 and 1920. So, a seemingly small increase in the odds of identifying children as mulatto would translate to thousands more mulatto-identified children borne of Black-Black unions in 1920 than in 1870.

Next, observe the predicted probabilities of mulatto identification for children with one mulatto parent and one Black parent, second from the right in the figure. The children of mulatto-Black parentage present one of the more interesting cases because they have one parent from each group. In 1870 the odds of the child of mulatto-Black parentage being identified as mulatto was .5, basically equal chances of being identified as mulatto or Black. However, in 1920, the odds of such a child being identified as mulatto was .63, a 26% increase that is

statistically significant according to my ANOVA. Despite the spread of the one drop rule, in 1920, children of one mulatto and one Black parent had greater odds of receiving a mulatto identification than a Black identification.

I will discuss the implications of these results in the following section.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

These results offer important insight into the transition to the one-drop-rule and how color stratification may have persisted into today. First, these results show that institutional changes in how we measure race do not necessarily lead to material changes or social changes for the groups involved. The proliferation of the one-drop-rule did not curb color stratification. While the one-drop-rule, in itself, probably did not exacerbate the stratification, mulattos managed to maintain their economic advantages, similar to the advantages they maintained after Emancipation (Reece 2018a). The previous advantages mulattos accrued both through economic and social ties likely allowed them to achieve more upward mobility than their Black-only counterparts as the economy expanded and industrialized in the early 20th century. Reece (2021) presents this argument to explain the expansion of colorism across the late 20th century as well, as the Civil Rights Movement opened new avenues to Black Americans. While this idea certainly requires more deliberate and rigorous testing, researchers continue to find empirical support it would reveal a glaring hole in race-based social policy and race measuring. If race policy, and other economic and social situations that lead to increased opportunities for Black Americans, stratify the Black population further by affording lighter skinned Black Americans upward mobility while denying such mobility to darker skinned Black Americans we must reconsider how to address racial inequality and consider that protections and considerations for color must accompany race policy if it hopes to reduce inequality.

Moreover, these findings show the limitations of our current models of measuring and analyzing race. Our racial categories have fluctuated over time, but ultimately the Census landed on a group of racial options that lie remarkably similar to the five racial groups propagated by 19th century eugenicists and race scientists. Monk (2022) discusses the perils of continuing to measure race only using the groups given to us by the Census. In doing so, we betray our respondents by neglecting to deploy measures that can better help us explain their lives, *and* we betray our disciplines, colleagues, and science in general by underestimating inequality and ignoring the groups who may be most impacted. Indeed, by refusing to reevaluate the racial categories we use and our common methods of measuring race and racial inequality we abdicate our responsibility to lend a critical eye to our topics of discussion and we begin to take the concept of race for granted rather than consistently asking the all-important question: What *is* a racial group? Reece (2021) argues that a combination of heightened color inequality and political bifurcation between light and dark skinned Black Americans not only highlights the need to account for color every time we can—perhaps even adding a color measure to the Census—but also suggests that the group we call “Black Americans” may be splintering. Rather than relying on a top-down system of racial categorization largely governed by the whims of the Census and the Office of Management and Budgets, we should try our hardest to adopt a more bottom-up approach that accounts for how people would like to identify and be identified. We can combine this

bottom-up approach with an inductive approach to studying inequality where we refuse to take the categories for granted and look for places where inequality emerges regardless of the categories attached to it.

Second, mulattos were reluctant to relinquish the advantages of their skin tone and independent racial identifier and seem to have sought to solidify their advantage and distance themselves and their children from other people with Black ancestry. We can combine the finding that parents with Black ancestry became increasingly likely to identify their children as mulattos with other findings that mulattos also became increasingly segregated from Black people (Notter & Logan, 2021) and findings that mulattos tended to marry other mulattos and otherwise affluent partners (Bodenhorn, 2006; Reece 2018b). In combination, this research suggests mulattos deliberately hoarded resources from their darker counterparts regardless of the complexities of formal racial identification.

This offers an additional mechanism for maintaining color stratification over time. Not only did white people heap favor on mulattos and eventually light skinned Black Americans (Hannon, 2015), mulattos also practiced social closure that allowed them to remain atop the hierarchy of blackness until racial restrictions were removed following the Civil Rights Act of 1964. While data limitations preclude us from replicating all the aforementioned historical studies with modern data, we know light skinned Black Americans are still more likely to marry other light skinned partners and marry partners with better economic prospects (Monk, 2014). Regardless of whether such marriage homogamy remains as deliberate as it may have been in the early 20th century, it still concentrates economic affluence in the hands of lighter skinned Black Americans at the expense of dark-skinned Black Americans.

Overall, this study contributes to the increasing number of studies looking to the past to try to understand the contemporary workings of colorism and race. The “mulatto” category on the Census at the time offers a rich source of data for analyzing colorism historically, including asking many questions that we lack the data to investigate today. The lack of comparable contemporary data on colorism makes such historical analyses even more important as they provide an avenue for us to speculate, extrapolate, and theorize about how colorism operates today, and more colorism and race researchers should seek to take advantage of this data. Colorism is a problem that largely continues to hide behind traditional race categories, and only through innovative, creative uses of data—both historical and modern—can we peel back the layers and gain a fuller understanding of this pernicious phenomenon.

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Appendix

TABLE A1
OLS Estimates of Occupational Score for Adults in the Labor Force

	MODEL 1		MODEL 2	
	β	SE	β	SE
INTERCEPT	14.93***	0.10	14.91***	0.11
MULATTO	0.72***	0.07	0.88***	0.14
1920	2.32***	0.07	2.35***	0.07
AGE	0.03***	0.001	0.03***	0.002
WOMAN	-7.24***	0.05	-7.23***	0.05
SOUTH	-1.44***	0.07	-1.44***	0.07
LITERATE	1.28***	0.06	1.28***	0.06
ON FARM	-4.17***	0.05	-4.17***	0.05
MULATTO X 1920			-0.20391	0.16
n	61522		61522	
r-squared	.33		.33	

*** $p < .0001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

TABLE A2
Odds Ratios for Child Identification as Black

	Model 1	Model 2
	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)
WHITE-MULATTO	>999.999 (<.001 - >999.999)	>999.999 (<.001 - >999.999)
MULATTO-MULATTO	>999.999 (>999.999 - >999.999)	911.01 (690.22 - >999.999)
WHITE-BLACK	42.287 (28.42-62.92)	17.48 (9.32-32.76)
MULATTO-BLACK	136.7 (122.78-152.19)	43.19 (37.19-50.16)
1920	1.48 (1.33-1.64)	0.33 (0.28-0.40)
AGE	1.001 (0.99-1.01)	1 (0.993-1.006)
GIRL	1.18 (1.08-1.30)	1.20 (1.09-1.31)
SOUTH	0.58 (0.49-0.69)	0.52 (0.44-0.62)
ON FARM	0.88 (0.80-0.97)	0.87 (0.79-0.97)
WHITE-MULATTO X 1920		2.43 (<0.001 - >999.999)
MULATTO-MULATTO X 1920		12.86 (8.48-19.53)
WHITE-BLACK X 1920		4.34 (1.92-9.79)
MULATTO-BLACK X 1920		7.14 (5.74-8.89)
n	54089	54089