

The Future of American Blackness: On Colorism and Racial Reorganization

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journals.sagepub.com/home/rbp**Robert L. Reece**¹ 

Abstract

This manuscript leverages the plethora of research on colorism and skin tone stratification among Black Americans to consider how the “Black” racial category may change going forward. I build on ideas about path dependence, racial and ethnic boundary formations, racial reorganization, and a case study on race and body size to explore how extant group-level differences in social outcomes and emerging differences in political attitudes between lighter skinned and darker skinned Black Americans may lead to a schism between the two groups that forces us to question what it means to identify or be identified as “Black.” The idea that “Black is Black” has become thoroughly engrained in the American imagination, facilitated by the history of “one-drop rules” and encouraged by racial segregation. This drives our racial categorization and fuels resistance to many public discussions of colorism. However, we may have reached an even more important crossroads in our examination of colorism that forces us to reckon with the question “what is a racial group?”

Keywords

Black Americans, skin tone, colorism, race/ethnicity, racial reorganization

Introduction

Skin color stratification, particularly among Black Americans, has gained increasing attention in both public and academic discourse over recent decades. Although the phenomenon has been noted among scholars and laymen from the earliest days of the Republic, our insights have deepened considerably with increases in the data available

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to us. Data availability has created a domino effect. As data on skin tone first became widely available in surveys in the mid- to late-1980s more research began to trickle through the social sciences and humanities. This, in turn, increased public and scholarly awareness, which spurred principle investigators to include a measure of skin tone in more and more social scientific surveys. Indeed, a skin tone variable seems to be an almost standard inclusion in major social scientific surveys, and qualitative research and documentaries also appear to have become more popular. Perhaps reflecting this growing awareness, the number of color complaints filed to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has increased dramatically since the 1990s, and colorism and skin tone stratification have been documented in almost every facet of American life.

However, our work is only just beginning. Researchers have done excellent work detailing the far-reaching impact of colorism. A broad cross-section of research shows that skin color stratification is almost ubiquitous, affecting mental and physical health (Diette et al., 2015; Hargrove, 2018a, 2018b; Laidley et al., 2019; Louie, 2019; McCleary-Gaddy & James, 2020; Monk, 2015; Perreira et al., 2018; Slaughter-Acey et al., 2019), the criminal justice system (Blair et al., 2004; Finkeldey & Demuth, 2019; Monk, 2019; Viglione et al., 2011), school punishments (Hannon et al., 2013), attractiveness (Reece, 2016; Ryabov, 2019), sports (Foy & Ray, 2020), and income (Goldsmith et al., 2006, 2007; Hersch, 2006; Hunter, 1998, 2002; Keith & Herring, 1991; Kreisman & Rangel, 2015; Monk, 2014; Reece, 2021; Robst et al., 2011; Sweet et al., 2007). But much less research focuses on understanding how colorism works and how it may shape the future of the American racial landscape, two questions that are inextricably linked.

The racial structure of the United States is constantly moving in unexpected directions in response to a number of factors, including demographic shifts, political expediency, and changes in social stratification (Strmic-Pawl et al., 2018). The impression that racial boundaries in the United States are relatively sharp and immutable is a myth maintained by the racial options offered on official documentation, starting with the U.S. Census (Prewitt, 2018). However, a growing number of studies show that racial categorization can be fickle. People can experience changes in racial categorization as they progress over the life course and/or as they move through various social contexts, such as between school and home (Alba et al., 2016; Bratter & O'Connell, 2017; Harris & Sim, 2002; Holloway et al., 2009; Liebler et al., 2017; Liebler & Zacher, 2016; Mason, 2017; Reece, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Saperstein & Penner, 2010, 2014). These microlevel racial shifts show that race is not as neat as Americans often imagine, and pave the way to interrogate, and possibly predict, macrolevel changes in the racial structure.

As skin tone becomes increasingly important in shaping the lives of Black Americans, or at least as more Black Americans become aware of the role of color in shaping their lives, I am primarily concerned with how color may facilitate changes in racial boundaries. In 2007, a report from the Pew Research Center found that nearly 40% of Black Americans feel that the Black population of the United States is too diverse to be considered a single racial group. These feelings coincide

with growing skin tone-based inequality and skin tone polarization of Black political and racial attitudes (Hutchings et al., 2016; Kreisman & Rangel, 2015). This makes it important that we seriously consider that Black Americans may not remain a unified racial group and explore the processes that may lead to racial divergence and examine the data for clues about where we stand in this process. With that in mind, I explore the growing divide between light- and dark-skinned Black Americans¹ through a lens of ethnic difference and racial reorganization to try to understand the future of Blackness in the United States. I seek to understand the slipperiness and complexity of race and how racial boundaries are redrawn over time.

This manuscript has seven substantive sections. First, I review existing social scientific theories on racial reorganization. Then I provide a brief history of colorism in the United States, followed by a discussion on the role of the U.S. Census in shaping racial categorization and the limitations of relying on Census categories to track racial boundary formation. Next, I explore how light-skinned Black Americans may be erecting boundaries between themselves and dark-skinned Black Americans and follow that with a discussion of racialized body standards as a case study for color boundary formation. Finally, I discuss how White people and dark-skinned Black people police their own racial boundaries, perhaps trapping light-skinned Black Americans in the middle. And I conclude by examining the eugenics origins of racial categories and how it is important for us to use the data at hand to determine where new boundaries may emerge rather than relying on the same categories given to us by discredited race research.

Extant Theories of Racial Reorganization

Racial reorganization has become a consistent topic of discussion and speculation among American race scholars, who have presented a number of theories, supported by a variety of evidence, to explain and predict the trajectory of racial categorization in the United States. These ideas have been met with a combination of support, scrutiny, and empirical tests and are nonetheless informative, regardless of whether they accurately predict changes in the racial structure. Each one makes explicit or implicit mentions of color in partially guiding their theory, but I will explain how they could be enriched by a deeper engagement with color.

Perhaps the most prominent, or at least most cited, theory of racial reorganization is the Latin-Americanization thesis of Bonilla-Silva (2017). He argues that the boundaries of racial categorization in the United States are transitioning to a structure similar to that of Latin America with three distinct tiers. “Whites,” including White Americans, White immigrants, White Latinos, and some native and Asian Americans, would occupy the top tier. The bottom tier, the “collective Black,” includes Black Americans, Black immigrants, native Americans who live on reservations, and dark-skinned Latinos and Asian Americans. Between the “Whites” and “collective Black” are the “honorary Whites,” consisting of most Asian Americans, light-skinned Latinos, Middle Eastern Americans, and multiracial Americans.

He argues that these strata are organized by color such that within the “collective Black” light-skinned people are more advantaged than their darker counterparts.

However, I argue that color organizes these strata. That means, particularly for Black Americans, that light-skinned and dark-skinned Americans would not occupy the same racial tier in this system.

Standing slightly opposite of Bonilla-Silva is Yancey (2003). Yancey argues that in the near future, our current racial structure, consisting of a number of racial categories, will devolve into a de facto “Black/non-Black divide.” As Asian Americans and Latinos discover the political and social capital in standing in opposition to Black Americans, he argues they will increasingly align themselves with White Americans, leaving Black Americans to fend for themselves at the bottom of a racial hierarchy against a collective “non-Black.”

However, similar to Bonilla-Silva, Yancey relies on the idea of a homogeneous Black America, which is increasingly not the case, particularly where color is concerned. The divide in political attitudes and racial alliances that Yancey uses as the primary mechanism shifting the racial structure towards a Black/non-Black divide is not just happening between Black and non-Black people of color. This schism of racial attitudes is also happening among Black Americans based on color (Hutchings et al., 2016; Lerman et al., 2015). It is possible that if we supplement Yancey’s theory with deeper ideas about colorism, we realize that dark-skinned Black Americans are becoming an increasingly severe racial underclass, as they are abandoned not just by other racial groups but by lighter-skinned members of their own racial group.

Pigmentocratic ideas have also occasionally been imported to the United States from Latin America (Telles, 2014). Pigmentocracy advocates argue that color has come to supersede race in order of importance in the United States, similar to Latin America where a range of identities describes an intricate color hierarchy rather than a sharply demarcated racial one. However, this fails to account for the centrality of racial self-identification in the United States even as color assumes an ever-increasing role in shaping life chances. Race remains a dominant organizational feature of life in the United States. Our task is to grapple with the intersection of race and color, rather than abandoning one for the other.

Next, amidst discussions of racial reorganization, research on racial fluidity has also emerged (e.g., Saperstein & Penner, 2010, 2014). This research challenges the idea that racial identification and racial perceptions are static over the life course. They argue that not only is race malleable at the macrolevel, in that racial categories and meanings shift over time, it is also malleable at the microlevel, in that individuals change race over the course of their lives in response to social phenomena. Much of this research fails to account for the role of color in shaping how people change their racial identification or how they are differentially perceived by others. However, Reece (2019a, 2019b, 2019c) shows that color is vital for understanding people’s racial identity changes. He uses a study of how Black multiracial adolescents shift their racial identity as they age to show that darker skinned youth more commonly changed to a “Black only” racial identification, whereas light-skinned youth were more likely to adopt a non-Black single race identity.

Finally, a branch of research has risen to reconsider Census Bureau projections that the United States will become a “majority–minority” society over the coming decades

(e.g., Alba, 2018). This work specifically focuses on how the increase in multiracial parentage muddies the Census projections and may lead to a de facto expansion of the “White” category (Alba et al., 2017, 2018). They show that people of multiracial parentage, with the exception of people with a Black parent, experience social outcomes that are more similar to those of monoracial White people than those of people of color. These findings identify how racial boundaries may be shifting and demographic projections that fail to account for changing racial boundaries are doomed to inaccuracy. However, like the other ideas presented here, this work also leans heavily on an assumption of a homogeneous Black population, rather than considering that the boundaries of Blackness may also be shifting. The current paper will demonstrate how the social outcomes of light-skinned Black people also seem to, more closely, resemble those of White people than dark-skinned Black people and consider what that may mean for the racial structure going forward.

Blacks and Mullatos: The History of Colorism in the United States

The collective Blackness, where it is standard practice that anyone with any Black ancestry identify as Black, that characterizes race in the United States today was only relatively recently imposed on Black Americans. For just as long in American history as we have agreed that “Black is Black,” Black Americans were split into multiple subgroups based on their perceived percentage of Black and White (and occasionally Native American) racial ancestry. From 1850 to 1920 the Census formalized these distinctions by offering a “mulatto” category in its official enumerations. So while a person may have been classified as Black, if Census enumerators believed they had multiracial heritage they were also classified as mulatto (Gross, 1998; Hochschild & Powell, 2008; Toplin, 1979).

This was not benign racial accounting. Both White and Black Americans attached powerful meanings to the mulatto classification. Indeed, in some cases, mulattos were perceived as being closer, racially and socially, to Whites than to Blacks. They were perceived as more diligent and meticulous, smarter and better looking (Frazier, 1930; Reuter, 1917; Toplin, 1979) and White people even thought that in the case of racial insurrection they could count on mulattos as allies. A legislative report from the early 1820s reads:

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).

These differences in perception mapped onto tangible social and economic differences for Blacks and mulattos. In the antebellum era, perhaps the most striking difference was that mulattos were vastly more likely to receive manumission and

were ultimately more likely to be free (Bodenhorn, 2011). Across the South mulattos were almost four times as likely to be free as Blacks (Reece, 2017), and in some places the difference between the Black enslaved population and the free mulatto population was so stark that mulatto became synonymous with “free Black” (Berlin, 1974). Yet, even when they occupied the same status as free or enslaved the two groups were still characterized by persistent stratification. On plantations, mulattos were afforded more privileged positions, often positions in trades or domestic roles (Frazier, 1930; Toplin, 1979). One former slave commented that mulattos benefited from so much agency to move throughout the plantation that “you’d hardly know they were slaves” (Frazier, 1930). Among the free population, mulattos lived much better lives than their Black counterparts. Mulattos accumulated more wealth and operated more successful businesses (Bodenhorn & Ruebeck, 2007; Schwening, 1989, 1990). And Black–mulatto stratification continued postemancipation. Mulattos continued to enjoy higher occupational prestige (Gullickson, 2010; Reece, 2018; Saperstein & Gullickson, 2013) and longer lives (Frazier, 1933; Green & Hamilton, 2013). However, the mulatto category eventually fell out of favor with both White and Black communities.

Without slavery to formalize and police the boundary between Black and White Americans, White people, especially Southerners, felt increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of a group of Black people being so close to them, both physically and socially (Womack, 2017). The ambiguity of where mulattos stood relative to other Black people and White people threatened to undermine new efforts at racial segregation so White people sought to clarify the racial categories by enacting what became known as “one-drop rules” (Brown, 2014). This legislation, which varied slightly from state to state, governed who was Black based on percentages of known or visible Black ancestry and began the process of unraveling mulattos’ privileged position by forcing them into a collective Black regardless of their mixed ancestry and light skin. This process perhaps reached its peak during the well-known court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Although *Plessy v. Ferguson* is generally acknowledged as a case that governed racial segregation policy it also played a pivotal role in shaping how Americans perceived color. It established that even Homer Plessy, a very light-skinned mulatto man, was not exempt from racial segregation (Washington, 2011). This ripped the floor from underneath mulattos and sent them tumbling from their privileged perch near White Americans to the collective Black at the bottom of the racial hierarchy where their darker skinned counterparts had long languished.

Meanwhile, Black Americans were also pushing back against the separation of mulattos. Prominent Black leaders such as WEB DuBois believed that a unified Black race was necessary to combat the evils of racial segregation. They believed that the difficulties faced by Black Americans could be best countered by a collective Black population, prepared to assume the challenges of the fight for racial justice without color-based in-fighting. (Washington, 2011)

Eventually, “mulatto” was removed from the Census. Its last year was 1920, and Americans would not be permitted to identify as multiracial on the Census again

until 2000. Although the era of the “mulatto” had officially ended, light-skinned Black Americans continued to police the boundaries of color with exclusive social clubs and organizations that catered primarily or exclusively to Black people with light skin (Bodenhorn, 2006; Meier & Lewis, 1959). These social closure strategies allowed them to continue to concentrate on economic and social advantages in preparation for the time when the legislative barriers against Black achievement were stripped away (Reece, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). This brings us to contemporary America when light-skinned Black Americans have seen rapid and ongoing upward mobility along with attitudinal changes and other phenomena that may signal a racial reorganization that results in a racial structure similar to the mulatto era of the United States.

Path Dependence and the Ongoing Role of the Census

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which is responsible for approving changes to the U.S. Census, has been shown to be at times vulnerable to outside pressure and at other times extremely resistant, often reflecting the political priorities of the time. For example, when the mulatto category first appeared on the Census it was in response to calls from eugenicists to try to understand the results of race mixing at a time when many scientists still believed mulattos may be sickly and sterile (Reuter, 1917). Later, when Hawaii and Alaska were annexed in 1959 the Census was forced to reckon with the racial classifications of new groups of native peoples, ultimately deciding to include native Hawaiians in the “Asian” category and native Alaskans in “Native Americans” before creating a new category for “Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders” in 2000 (Robbins, 2000).

However, since then, the OMB has been reluctant to approve changes to the Census despite strong evidence of the benefits of additional categories from the Census Bureau’s own research. Leading up to the 2020 Census, the Census Bureau conducted a series of experiments to test the efficacy of a category for better identifying Middle Easterners and North Africans who are currently instructed to identify as “White.” The results were unequivocal. Participants were excited to use this category when it was available and felt that it represented their experiences better than the current categorization (Mathews et al., 2017). In the absence of a Middle Eastern/North African category, people with roots in that region reported feeling unrepresented by the current categories, particularly because they are not seen as and treated as White. Yet, the OMB neglected to approve any changes to data collection. This may be a signal the bureaucracy governing racial classification in the United States may be slower to move than in the past.

Since 2000, researchers have noticed that even seemingly innocuous changes, such as allowing people to select more than one racial group can reveal the complex ways people live race and dilute the accuracy of our racial measurements. Two cases highlight these particularities. First, Mason (2017) found that the number of Black Americans who identified as multiracial increased dramatically after the election of Barack Obama, highlighting how people move in and out of racial categories based on social circumstance. President Obama seemingly opened the door to new ways of

identifying for Black people who felt forced to identify as “Black only” up until that point. Second, Liebler et al. (2016) also found that the number of Native Americans increased dramatically from the 2000 to the 2010 Census, largely as a result of White Americans choosing “Native American” in addition to White on their forms. Other researchers have written more eloquently about the troublesome history of the myth of the “Cherokee” ancestor among White people (TallBear, 2013), but for demographers, this type of arbitrary demographic shifting presents a different problem. Native Americans and White Americans have vastly different social outcomes and when White people choose that box on a form without facing the same social reality, the social outcomes of Native Americans can be artificially inflated by White people pulling up the average. Indeed, there are important debates about whether the current configuration of racial offerings by the Census, including the ability to choose more than one racial group, are the best ways to accomplish the goals of the Census, which is to collect data that can be used for official purposes such as monitoring inequality, not necessarily accommodating the identity preferences of every American (Prewitt, 2018; Strmic-Pawl et al., 2018). And knowing that about 40% of multiracial Americans on the 2000 Census changed to a monoracial category in 2010, that about 25% of mixed race parents identify their children as monoracial, and that non-Black multiracial people have social outcomes that mirror White people’s contribute to the messiness of using Census data to track inequality and doubt about the usefulness of selecting multiple racial categories (Alba, 2018; Prewitt, 2018).

Black Americans face a similar issue as that elucidated by Native Americans as White people check the Native American box on the Census. By ignoring color and a widening schism based on color, we inevitably overestimate the success of the Black population and underestimate the disadvantages faced by dark-skinned Black people. If the role of the racial categories on the Census is to track inequality, a metric for color, even if self-reported (Monk (2015) even suggests that self-reported color is a better predictor of discrimination than interviewer coded color), would provide invaluable data for understanding the lives of Black Americans.

The processes facilitating the OMB’s refusal to instate important changes to the Census racial categories can best be described using a path dependence model elucidated by Pierson (2004). Path dependence explains why inefficient organizational forms continue to dominate more efficient and useful organizational forms. In short, once in use the costs of changing inefficient organizational forms may exceed the perceived benefits of changing to a more efficient organizational form, and the longer the inefficient form continues to dominate—that is, the longer the Census remains wedded to its current racial categories—the more difficult it becomes to change them, regardless of how the changes may improve the organization. Pierson (2004) offers four mechanisms of path dependence in politics that I will use to describe the overwhelming stagnation of Census categories before turning to a discussion of mechanisms for possible institutional change.

First, he specifies that politics is collective. Changing political organizations like the Census requires collective action, which can often be prohibitive. People must weigh the costs of engaging in collective action against the potential rewards. And in politics,

there are no rewards for second or third place, people either achieve their political goals or they do not—they either change the Census or they do not. Therefore, people must anticipate the political decisions of other people and decide if they will achieve a critical mass of people necessary to create change. In the case of the Census, even organized campaigns to change the racial categories have met resistance and failed. Knowing that movements must be bigger and louder than previous ones may further decrease people's incentive to organize for change.

Second, he describes the institutional density of politics. Even people who object to how an organization functions are often forced to participate because the state does not typically negotiate as much as it provides instruction.

[Otherwise,] institutions and policies may encourage individuals and organizations to invest in specialized skills, deepen relationships with other individuals and organizations, and develop particular political and social identities. These arrangements increase the attractiveness of existing institutional arrangements relative to hypothetical alternatives (Pierson, 2004, p. 35).

In the case of the Census racial categories, academics, universities, think tanks, non-profits, policy writers, and any other institutions or organizations charged with collecting and analyzing data by race have become invested in the categories as they are. Abrupt and dramatic changes risk making their data less comparable to previous years, which diminishes their ability to make comparisons over time, and necessitates considerable adjustments to their data collection and analysis processes. This investment in the status quo, even if purportedly for the greater good, becomes a barrier to change.

Third, he takes aim at political power asymmetries. Power concentrates in certain places in organizational bureaucracies, meaning that powerful people can make changes or stunt changes to their own benefit. The Census is not exactly a bureaucracy and its reporting to the OMB makes changes that even the Census Bureau deems expedient subject to the whims of just a few people whose interests may be opaque.

Fourth and finally, he discusses the complexity and opacity of politics. Enacting political change becomes even more difficult because of the diffuse and open-ended nature of political institutions. It is difficult to know where to target political agitation because of “long lags and complex causal chains” (Pierson, 2004, p. 38). In the case of the Census, there is not even an electoral process so understanding where to aim political action may be more complicated than policies with seemingly direct ties to electoral politics. Although the Census falls under the executive branch of the federal government, presidential candidates do not typically highlight their plans for the Census on the campaign trail so even if people would like to take this into account when evaluating their electoral choices, they are generally denied the opportunity.

However, Census categories are not determinant, regardless of the outsized role they play in shaping and reflecting our racial reality. Islamophobia has not been deterred by the fact that many Muslims are instructed to check the “White” box on their Census forms. Immigration raids targeting Latinos have not been deterred by the ambiguity of the “Hispanic” ethnicity question. Despite the apparent reluctance of the OMB to adjust

the racial categories on the Census, racial reorganization may still be on the horizon, and next, I turn my attention to the mechanisms that may facilitate racial reorganization.

Boundary Strengthening and Racial Reorganization

There is a growing body of evidence that the racial and political attitudes of light and dark-skinned Black Americans have diverged sharply over the past three decades. Most colorism research using survey data since the early 1990s documented what came to be called a “skin color paradox” (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007). The skin color paradox was the name given to the finding that despite their vastly different social and economic opportunities—that light-skinned Black Americans tended to perform much better than dark-skinned Black Americans—there was no statistically significant difference between the racial and political attitudes of light and darker skinned Black Americans. Researchers generally attributed this paradox to how Black Americans experience racial socialization in the United States. They believed that the strength of racial socialization, the belief in sharp racial boundaries, and the axiom that “although we have different skin tones, we are all Black” flattened attitudinal differences even across intragroup variance in life chances.

However, research that uses more recent data suggests that the skin color paradox may be waning as attitudinal differences emerge between light- and dark-skinned Black Americans. The most damning evidence is perhaps that of Hutchings et al. (2016) who used data from 2006. They find that light-skinned Black Americans are more conservative compared to darker skinned Black Americans. Light-skinned Black Americans are less likely to support economic redistribution policies and affirmative action policies, and they are more likely to embrace negative racial stereotypes about Black people. These attitudes may signal that they perceive distance between themselves and the larger Black population. Rejecting policy that would ostensibly positively impact Black communities, coupled with embracing stereotypes about those communities, may be a sign that they feel these stereotypes do not apply to them and that they lack a sense of “linked fate” with other Black people.

Dawson (1994) argues that before the mid-1960s Black life was overdetermined by race, which denied them a lack of full participation in economic and political life and drove their liberalism and their sense of racial solidarity. He proposes the Black utility heuristic which “suggests that as long as race remains dominant in determining the lives of individual Blacks, it is ‘rational’ for African Americans to follow group cues in interpreting and acting in the political world” (p. 68). However, as more Black people, and in this case, more light-skinned Black people, take advantage of the doors opened through the Civil Rights Movement, they may begin to perceive that race is no longer the primary factor shaping their lives and see their racial identities and sense of connection to the Black community weaken, particularly as they gain access to spaces that were previously dominated by White people. He explains that this process may be characterized by a temporal lag.

Black institutions and social networks also serve to limit the reduction of Black political homogeneity. Political heterogeneity ... takes longer to take hold because such changes are presumably mediated ... by familial and other ties ... If one belongs to a family in

which some members are in trouble economically, or if one lives in a racially segregated community, one may be more likely to support liberal economic and racial policies despite middle class status (Dawson, 1994, p.70).

Although his primary focus is economic differences, the same logic applies to color. Even light-skinned people who may have experienced upward mobility likely maintain ties to darker skinned relatives who may not have been as fortunate. These ties function to keep light-skinned Black people grounded in the larger community and helps explain why the skin color paradox persisted through the 1990s, a few decades after the Civil Rights Movement, and did not dissipate until the 2000s.

Reece's (2018) arguments about boundary maintenance between Blacks and mulattos in the late-19th century offer further insight into the processes dividing light and dark-skinned Black Americans and how racial reorganization may persist despite the path dependence of the OMB and the Census. He builds on the theory of ethnic boundary formation of Wimmer (2008) to explain how mulattos seized an opportunity in the wake of emancipation to strengthen the social boundaries between themselves and Blacks. The processes they described may be reemerging as light-skinned Black Americans reconstruct old boundaries to distance themselves from dark-skinned Black Americans, similar to their mulatto counterparts.

First, Wimmer argues that actors emphasize ethnic boundaries when they are offered incentive to do so. It is not a random process. Mulattos in the 19th century were encouraged to strengthen their color boundaries as protection against White backlash in the wake of emancipation. Emphasizing their difference from Black people may have offered a measure of safety from White violence and also increased economic opportunity (Jones, 2000). Correspondingly, light-skinned Black Americans today may be responding to the multiracial movement of the last few decades that highlighted multiracial Black Americans and allowed them to slowly move away from the pressure to identify as one race, generally Black, only. Arguably this movement culminated with the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, which sparked a widespread increase in the number of Americans who chose to identify as multiracial (Mason, 2017). Moreover, Reece (2019a, 2019b, 2019c) found that among Black adolescents who identified as multiracial, those with lighter skin were significantly more likely to identify as a non-Black single race in adulthood. A space may be opening between Blackness and Whiteness that light-skinned Black Americans can again begin to fill. By distancing themselves from Blackness they might open new opportunities for themselves, and two examples of this stand out. Frank (2002) and Brooks (2010), during ethnographies of strip clubs, found that dancers learned patrons tipped more when dancers claimed to be multiracial. Similarly, Reece (2016) shows that not only are lighter skinned Black Americans considered more attractive than darker Black Americans, but multiracial Black Americans are considered more attractive than monoracial Black Americans even when controlling for phenotype. All three studies demonstrate that there are tangible benefits to creating social and symbolic distance from Black Americans, which offers light-skinned Black Americans incentive to erect stronger boundaries between themselves and dark-skinned Black Americans.

Wimmer goes on to stress that social networks determine where boundaries are drawn. Maintaining high status social connections offers a group more power to draw boundaries where they want them as opposed to having boundaries forced upon them, which has primarily been the case with regard to Black Americans and race. Reece argues that mulattos leveraged their connections to powerful White people, who were occasionally their parents and other relatives, to construct boundaries between themselves and Black people. A similar process may work in favor of light-skinned Black people contemporarily. White people perceive lighter Black Americans as smarter than darker Black Americans (Hannon, 2015), which may lead to more and more genuine, useful social contact. And although there are no extant studies of this for Black Americans, Uzogara (2018) found evidence of residential segregation by color among Latinos in the United States. Light-skinned Latinos were more likely to live in predominately White neighborhoods, whereas darker Latinos tended to live in mixed-race neighborhoods. A comparable pattern among Black Americans would be an important marker of social networking. Moreover, Craig-Henderson (2014) suggests that some light-skinned Black Americans may seek out White romantic partners as a way to capitalize on White people's favorable racial status and as a reflection of their biases against darker skinned Black Americans. A number of studies also show that light-skinned Black people tend to partner other light-skinned Black people in an exercise in color homogamy (Bodenhorn, 2006; Monk 2014; Reece, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Marriage patterns have historically been an important part of maintaining racial distance and racial hierarchy, as particularly evident by the antimiscegenation laws that proliferated across the country in the wake of emancipation (Washington, 2011). With that in mind, color homogamy in marriage and interracial marriage by light-skinned Black people may be prominent signs of the social distance between light- and dark-skinned Black Americans.

Finally, Wimmer contends that constructing new boundaries ultimately relies on the consensus of the actors involved. In the case of mulattos and Blacks in the 19th century that meant Blacks, mulattos, and Whites had to agree that mulattos constituted a buffer group between Blacks and Whites and separate from both. This was an easy process to track in the 1800s because the Census reified this difference by including "mulatto" as a category on the decennial Census. We may have more difficulty identifying the consensus in the absence of formal recognition akin to the Census. However, there are burgeoning signs of such agreement, many of which I have already mentioned. The aforementioned study from the Pew Research Center suggests about 40% of Black Americans believe that the Black population is too diverse to be considered a single racial group. Although this does not offer any insight into the type of diversity and racial reorganization they may be referencing, it reveals that the idea of racial reorganization is at least palatable for a large segment of the Black population. The study by Lerman et al. (2015) also points toward a type of consensus. Light- and dark-skinned Black Americans both agree that dark-skinned Black Americans represent a more "authentic" Blackness, which may signify that light-skinned Americans are simultaneously moving away and being pushed away from the racial category "Black." Institutionalized consensus may be a ways off, meaning full racial reorganization has yet to arrive, but given the salience of other factors, it may be on the horizon.

An Unexpected Case Study: Race, Color, and Body Standards

Although body size and fatness may not seem to fit neatly into an examination of racial reorganization they actually offer the perfect case study for us to explore shifting racial boundaries as they relate to skin color differences among Black Americans. Alba et al. (2017) conclude that the “U.S. mainstream” may be expanding by showing that people of multiracial parentage experience social and economic outcomes more similar to those of people with two White parents than to those with non-White parents. A number of studies show that this is also the case for light-skinned Black Americans relative to dark-skinned Black Americans. Goldsmith et al. (2006, 2007) find that the gap in wages between light-skinned Black people and White people is smaller than that between light-skinned Black people and dark-skinned Black people. And Burch (2015) finds there is no statistical difference between the criminal sentencing of White Americans and light-skinned Black Americans, while medium- and dark-skinned Black Americans receive sentences that are about 5% longer. An analysis of body standards allows us to build on and deepen these previous observations by exploring whether the body standards of light-skinned Black Americans resemble those of White people more closely than they resemble those of dark-skinned Black people. This would offer more strong evidence in support of the thesis that light- and dark-skinned Black people are experiencing a schism. First, we must briefly explore the racial history of body standards.

Body standards are malleable. Contemporary mainstream America prizes slim bodies and stigmatizes bigger bodies, but that was not always the case. Today’s body standards are the result of a centuries long racial project in the western world where body standards shifted as they were increasingly attached to race (Strings, 2019). Across the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe, artists and physicians viewed plumpness as a marker of beauty and affluence. Many medical texts of the time decried slimness as dangerous and preached the virtue of having a bigger body. And, much like today, body standards are reflected in art, which then generally depicted curvy, round women, in contrast to the slim forms plastered across billboards in modern America.

However, as the transAtlantic slave trade began to flourish, putting more and more western Europeans and, soon after, Americans in contact with enslaved Africans, stereotypes about Africans’ voracious appetites and naturally rotund bodies prompted a sea change in the minds of White people, especially in the newly formed United States (Strings, 2019). As plumpness became increasingly associated with Blackness, White people, especially White women, saw thinness as a way to distance themselves from Black people and demonstrate the superiority of their race. For them, thinness not only represented beauty, it also signaled self-control, which Black people supposedly lacked (Gagliardi, 2018).

Those racialized body standards became hardened over decades of medicalization, exploitation by diet and exercise industries, and reification by media and pop culture such that today White people and Black people continue to exhibit vastly different body standards. Black people report higher ideal bodyweights than their White counterparts

and are less likely to view themselves as “overweight” (Fletcher, 2014; Himmelstein et al., 2017). White women’s self-esteem, perception of beauty, and sexual activity are more strongly tied to their body size than Black women’s (Ali et al., 2013, 2014). And most important for my argument here: White people’s body standards for Black people are more relaxed than their body standards for other White people. In one study where a group of White women were asked to rate pictures of other women on their attractiveness, intelligence, and happiness, they rated bigger White women considerably lower relative to smaller White women than they rated bigger Black women relative to smaller Black women (Hebl & Heatherton, 1998). That is, they perceived bigger White women less favorably than bigger Black women.

These divergent body standards seem to lead to differential treatment of people based on combinations of their race, size, and gender, and that differential treatment is exemplified by how groups experience a weight income penalty. Although White people, particularly White women, suffer significant penalties in wages, education, and wages for having bigger bodies, Black people do not experience the same penalties (Fletcher, 2014). Black men with bigger bodies may even experience an income boost (Slade, 2017). This sets the stage for us to use the weight income penalty as a case study for exploring racial reorganization.

The idea that body standards reflect and reproduce racial categorization is not new. Smith (2014) argues that White people have accepted the more relaxed body standards of Black Americans as a marker of racial inferiority:

From a hegemonic standpoint, the place of fat shaming in minority communities can be understood as a subcategory of general racism: those minorities are “supposed” to be less than the mainstream culture; size is just one more reason to look down on them (Smith, 2014, p. 158).

This idea is exemplified by how middle-class Black women in the early 20th century saw slenderness as an ideal that would bring them favor in the eyes of affluent White women. In effect, they thought that being thin would make them closer to White (Purkiss, 2017). Relatedly, as obesity rates among Native people in Canada began to increase in the mid-20th century, public health officials perceived it as a sign that they were becoming more “civilized” (McPhail, 2017). Prior to this point Native Canadians were considered immune to obesity because it was thought to be a disease that reflected the modernity and sophistication of White civilization. In both cases having body standards that mirrored those of White people was seen as a virtue, a step towards Whiteness and proper civilization. Therefore, if we find that light-skinned Black Americans have body standards that appear to mirror those of White people we may begin to conclude that they are making steps, if not towards Whiteness at least away from the type of Blackness embodied by their darker skinned counterparts.

This case is bolstered by a methodological concern. Almost all studies of skin color stratification among Black Americans analyze social outcomes that mirror racial stratification in their direction. For example, when studying income the direction of the color stratification is the same as the direction of the race stratification—light to

dark—such that it appears to be a gradient from the darkest skinned Black Americans with the lowest incomes to White Americans with the highest incomes and light-skinned Black Americans somewhere in the middle (Goldsmith et al., 2006, 2007). Although that offers us important insight into intraracial color stratification it does not help us understand whether light-skinned Black Americans are becoming an independent racial group.

If we compare light- and dark-skinned Black Americans on a metric that does not follow the White-over-Black racial hierarchy we start to learn how much light-skinned Black Americans differ from their dark-skinned counterparts and how similar they are to White Americans. The bodyweight income penalty offers us the opportunity to perform such a comparison. By analyzing whether light-skinned Black Americans suffer an income penalty like that experienced by White Americans or experience no penalty like Black Americans we can further hypothesize about the future of race and Blackness in the United States. If light-skinned Black Americans do not suffer a body size income penalty, suggesting they are held to Black body standards, it may signal that even though they are advantaged relative to darker Black Americans there is still a sharp demarcation between Black and White Americans. If light-skinned Black Americans *do* suffer a body size income penalty, suggesting they are held to body standards more similar to White people, perhaps the racial structure is changing such that light-skinned Black Americans stand apart from darker Black Americans.

Reece (2019a, 2019b, 2019c) analyzed this question using regression analysis and a nationally representative survey sample. He found that light-skinned Black Americans indeed suffer an income penalty for their weight, like White Americans, and unlike their fellow Black Americans. This suggests that the sharp boundary that we imagine between Black and White Americans may be a relic of a racial past if it was ever even a reality. Instead, we may be experiencing a shift in how Americans experience race where racial categories may be less important than gradients in color such that light-skinned Black Americans' light skin may be more of a defining feature in their life chances than their identity as Black. Alternatively, we may be experiencing a reorganization of racial categories where light-skinned Black Americans occupy a space that is not quite White but not quite Black, similar to the mulatto category of the past. Although this is only one study that tackles the question of color in an admittedly roundabout way, it offers an important first step in understanding the differences between these two possible futures and, which seems more likely requires further exploration of the differences between light- and dark-skinned Black Americans, their divergent political and racial attitudes, and how light-skinned Black Americans may seek to police the boundaries between the two groups.

Contraction at Both Ends

So what then happens to light-skinned Black Americans? What role do they occupy in this racial future? Surely they are not to become White. Abascal (2020) shows how White Americans “contract” their idea of Whiteness when exposed to information about changing demographics. Seeking to protect their privileged social position,

when White people were prompted to think about changing demographics they were less likely to classify ambiguously White people as White. This is particularly true in the case of White–Black ambiguity, which is less likely to be classified as White than White–Asian ambiguity. In this way, White people are able to police the boundaries of Whiteness. So while the mainstream may be expanding as demonstrated by Alba et al. (2017) and increasingly by colorism research, the privileges of “full” Whiteness may be more elusive and complex. Indeed, a number of other studies show that when White people feel their demographics are threatened, rather than expanding the boundaries to maintain numerical dominance as suggested by Alba (2018), they may instead seek to close ranks and police the borders of Whiteness more vigorously. In response to information about demographic change White people are more likely to express a preference for interaction with other White people (Craig & Richeson, 2014), express greater sympathy towards other White people (Outten et al., 2012), and are more likely to identify as White rather than American (Abascal, 2015). Concurrently, they also express colder feelings towards people of color (Craig & Richeson, 2014), express greater fear and anger towards people of color (Outten et al., 2012), and are less generous to Black strangers (Abascal, 2015).

Conversely, Black Americans also show signs of racial contraction, to the exclusion of lighter skinned and multiracial Black Americans. Both light- and dark-skinned Black people see dark skin as more authentic Blackness (Lerman et al., 2015), but there are other signs as well. Particularly in the case of multiracial Black Americans, their claims to a Black-only racial identity are not always reciprocated (Franco & Franco, 2016). In combination, these studies suggest that Black Americans also engage in some types of boundary policing.

With White people policing the boundaries of Whiteness and Black people policing the boundaries of Blackness it may seem as if light-skinned Black people are being squeezed from both ends of the racial spectrum even as they erect their own boundaries between themselves and their darker counterparts. However, the consequences of this multifaceted boundary maintenance are yet to be seen.

The Future of the Black Racial Category

As an important caveat as I conclude this manuscript, I must say that I am not advocating that light-skinned Black Americans get forcibly expelled from the Black race. It is not my intention to provide intellectual fodder for others who may feel that way (and there are many who do). Nor am I advocating a “big tent” idea of Blackness whereby anyone can move freely in and out of their Black identity as it suits them. Instead, I seek to highlight that skin tone is an important factor shaping where and how racial boundaries are drawn and its increasing importance in influencing the life outcomes of Black Americans cannot be ignored for the sake of keeping the peace.

The idea that “Black is Black” has become thoroughly engrained in the American imagination, facilitated by the history of “one-drop rules” and encouraged by racial segregation (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007). This drives our racial categorization and fuels resistance to many public discussions of colorism. However, we may have

reached an even more important crossroads in our examination of colorism that forces us to reckon with the question “what *is* a racial group?”

The modern idea of race, and all of its legal and administrative applications, has generally leaned on the taken-for-granted idea that we “know it when we see it.” Eugenics era racial science was mostly about validating the differences that were apparent to their eyes; people looked different therefore they must be different (Roberts, 2011). Society largely accepted the belief that we could determine racial admixtures simply by looking. For example, a transcript from a North Carolina judge in 1859 said

[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).

His statement echoes the sentiment from a witness testimony in Arkansas the previous year. A woman was arrested with a firearm. It was illegal for Black people to possess firearms so her defense in court rested primarily on the claim that she was not Black. The witness sought to estimate the racial admixture of the defendant based only on her appearance:

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)

Although we like to think we have moved to a more sophisticated way of viewing race, our racial categorization today still relies heavily on the “five major groups” identified by 19th- and 20th-century race scientists. Indeed, those are the very same groups that the OMB mandated appear on every future Census (Prewitt, 2018). To continue to rely on those categories without examining how racialization shifts over time and make adjustments means that we have allowed our eugenic history to permanently shape our understanding of racial boundaries. As social scientists, that not only means we are stuck in the same racial traps we purport to analyze and deconstruct but it also means the data we deploy, that we claim is representative of society, is misrepresenting people’s identities and experiences and, most importantly, misrepresenting inequality.

The “one-drop rules” of the early 20th century attempted to shift our perception of race from being a largely visual pursuit to one that focused more on ancestry. Instead, what has become clear is that these laws merely separated our ideas about racial self-identification from the tangible reality of our social outcomes and life chances. These series of laws that have become classified as “one-drop rules” and the resulting tradition of hypodescent mandated that anyone with Black ancestry, regardless of color, identify as Black, and those norms continue to govern racial self-identification in

modern America even though a number of studies show that physical appearance, more than ancestry or racial self-identification, is the best predictor of social outcomes for Black Americans (Alba et al., 2018; Roth 2016). The category “Black” encompasses a wide variety of people with vastly different phenotypes and resulting divergent social outcomes, and increasingly divergent political attitudes, based on that phenotype. Some research even suggests skin color may be the most important social factor shaping the life outcomes of Black Americans (Keith & Herring, 1991).

Although we must not discount the importance of racial self-identification and the institutional formality of Census categories, surely we do not have to wait for the slow-moving wheels of federal bureaucracy to declare that we have experienced a form of racial reorganization. Indeed, governmental bureaucracies maintain their own racialized political goals that are often unspoken (Ray, 2019). Evidence continues to mount that we are at least in the middle of such a process, if not on the tail end of it, where light- and dark-skinned Americans may live different racial realities. Being critical of race means we cannot be beholden to the options offered to us by the government when considering the state of the racial structure in the United States. And it is imperative that we acknowledge the changes we are observing, lest we risk biasing our study of inequality going forward.

Relying primarily on racial self-identification to measure social outcomes may lead us to underestimate the disadvantage of dark-skinned Black people *and* to miscalculate their politics. Aggregating two groups of people—light- and dark-skinned Black Americans—with such vastly different experiences does not give us an accurate view of either group, which is a disservice to research(ers) and respondents, who trust us to contextualize their lives.

Self-identification surely matters when we consider shared cultural experiences that are important to what it means to be “Black” so it may be equally unfair to abandon that entirely. But we must find a way to consistently capture that part of collective Black life while continuing to explore the growing differences and further maintaining the possibility that the cultural experiences may also diverge as this racial reorganization begins to crystalize.

Elsewhere, researchers have offered a variety of alternate ways to measure race in the United States (e.g., Roth 2016). I will not describe them all here, but I will introduce one more. Similar to the two-part “Hispanic” ethnicity question on race documentation, we should introduce a two-part question for Black identity as well. One measure of self-identified race and a second for self-identified color with three options: light, medium, and dark. This would allow us to capture the Black self-identification while offering meter metrics to track color and monitor any ongoing racial reorganization. Although self-identified color may seem like a messy measure, Monk (2015) demonstrates that is a strong predictor of discrimination. More comprehensive data on color would afford us the ability to ensure that the people who are in most desperate need of aid—dark-skinned Black people—are first in line to receive it rather than being leap-frogged by light-skinned Black people for race-based opportunities. This is also admittedly an imperfect system, but racial categorization is inherently imperfect and until it is no longer necessary to track race for the function of measuring inequality, we are forced

to manage systems that are varying degrees of imperfect. So while not ideal, measure Blackness with at least two metrics is less imperfect than our current measures.


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Note

1. Although most studies of colorism do not dichotomize color, instead opting for scales from three to seven levels, a recent analysis by Reece (2021) suggests that the operative skin tone difference is between light-skinned Black people and everyone else. So for the purposes of this paper I use “dark skinned” to refer to Black people who may be classified in various analyses as “medium” or “dark” skinned.

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