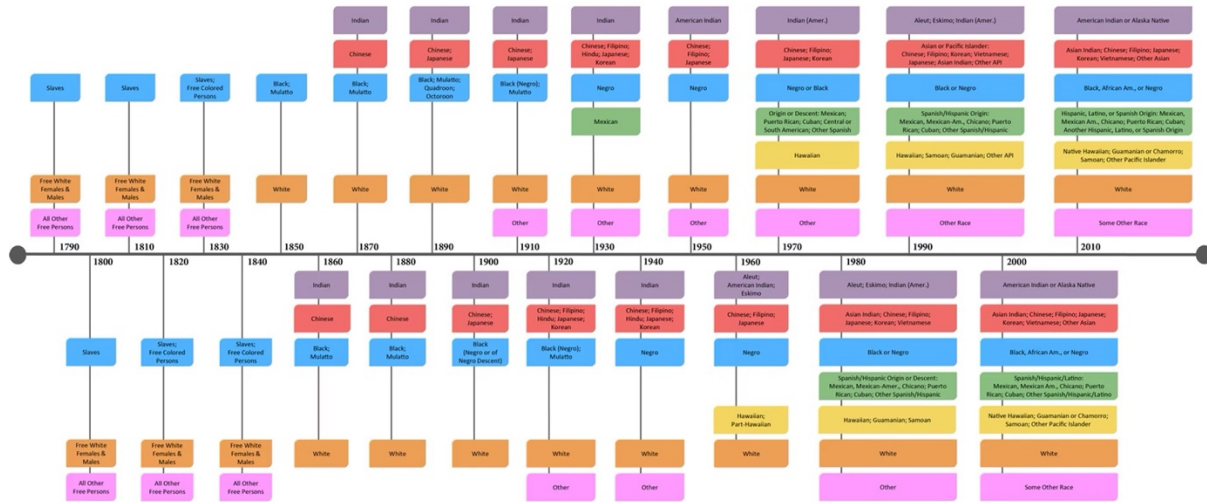


Blackness February 16, 2025 Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer

I want to begin by looking at a couple of slides.¹

Measuring Race and Ethnicity Across the Decades: 1790–2010
Mapped to 1997 U.S. Office of Management and Budget Classification Standards



This first slide which you probably can't read is a really useful collection of information. It lays out all of the different racial categories used in the US census from 1790 until 2020. I'm sharing it mostly because it is a very striking visual representation of how the government has seen race over the years.

The original Census had 3 categories and as of 2010, there were 63. One of the most important changes to the Census occurred in 1970 when people began being given the opportunity to self-select their race on the census as opposed to a census taker ticking a box based entirely on what they thought they saw.

When people tell me they are uncomfortable or confused as to why there is so much concern and conversation over race, this last point about the Census is a useful moment of understanding. While you may personally believe that everyone is equal and that you don't "see" race, imagine what it must feel like to have someone come to your door, look at you and tick a box, without you seeing it. While race may indeed be a social construct, from a practical standpoint, we use data collection for a whole host of

¹ "Measuring Race and Ethnicity Across The Decades: 1790—2010 - U.S. Census Bureau," accessed May 2, 2023, https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/race/MREAD_1790_2010.html.

things like understanding health patterns and the spread of disease, not to mention employment, taxation, education, housing and infrastructure. While you may not want to see it, we live in a world that does. Ignoring the world obsession does not help, even if race doesn't guide your personal decisions, and it shouldn't. Still, we all need tools to understand this thing called race. And yes, this "racial" data has been used for fairly nefarious purposes such as determining where freeways would cut through urban areas based on racially driven and income data, neighborhood redlining etc. So, while you may not see it, there have been more than enough people over time who *are* willing to see race and use it as a tool of social engineering. Ignoring race in America is like showing up to a professional tennis match with a ping pong paddle. Like it or not, we live in a world shaped by race...and it is more shaped by race for some than for others.

To that point, let's have a look at the second slide...

Slaves (1790 - 1810)	
Slaves; Free Colored Persons (1820 - 1840)	
Black; Mulatto (1850 - 1880)	
Black; Mulatto; Quadroon; Octoroon (1890)	
Black (Negro or of Negro Descent) (1900)	Free White Females & Males (1790 - 1840)
Black (Negro); Mulatto (1910 - 1920)	
Negro (1930 - 1960)	White (1850 - 2020)
Negro or Black (1970)	
Black or Negro (1980 - 1990)	
Black, African Am., or Negro (2000 - 2010)	
Black, African American (2020)	

Yeah, that's a lot of names for blackness. And only three over time for whiteness. Historian Winthrop Jordan, who is known for his groundbreaking 1968 book: *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550 - 1812* offers insight in

another piece titled “*Historical Origins of the One Drop Racial Rule in the United States*” written shortly before his death in 2011:

In this country, the social standard for individuals is superficially simple: if a person of whatever age or gender is believed to have any African ancestry, that person is regarded as black. ... This social rule has been easy to overlook because it is so close to home, often in a personal way, and because it involves self-identification as well as identification of others. Almost all people in the United States tend to operate perceptually and conceptually according to this simple social rule concerning race without stopping to question its logic. Why question the way the world works when that way is so obvious? And far from questioning the rule, many Americans seem almost resistant to acknowledging its existence, and some of those who have thought about the rule angrily assign blame to some nefarious group for promoting it.²

I have a confession. I study whiteness. People ask me what are you doing your PhD in and I generally say “Religious Studies” and that is true, but there is more. I give a less specific answer because the complete answer opens a whole can of worms that I usually don’t want to get into in casual conversation. Why you might ask would I want to do something like studying whiteness? Why would I stand in a pulpit and talk about it? The Census is one clue. But for me there is much more.

To put a finer point on it, I study the connection between whiteness and religion. Not Christian Nationalism, or white supremacy...I actually look at the specific connection between whiteness and 19th century Unitarianism as an example of how whiteness can take on the contours and obligations of religion and dominate a social location, or the way people are in the world.

One crucial part of my work involves being able to uncouple the word “whiteness” from skin color. While having white skin might be a marker of access to the “rights and privileges” of whiteness, it is not the only way people access whiteness, nor is it the only way that whiteness functions globally. Interestingly, W.E.B. Du Bois gave us the language of “race as a social construct” at the turn of the 20th century. This turn of phrase is so commonplace now that it is a bit of an assumption and a throwaway, particularly in liberal minded circles. My work isn’t satisfied with leaving that idea as an

² Winthrop D. Jordan and Paul Spickard, “Historical Origins of the One-Drop Racial Rule in the United States,” *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* 1 (n.d.): 98.

assumption. I want to be an expert in understanding “the master’s tools”. Where whiteness is concerned, I’m committed to thinking deeply about *what is social* about it...how does it connect people. I’m also committed to thinking deeply about *how is it constructed*...where does the idea, the shape and power of whiteness actually come from.

But why whiteness? Why not blackness?

Blackness is studied every single day in the United States of America. Regarding blackness, Du Bois first asked and then every black scholar since has responded to the question: “How does it feel to be a problem?” One look at the multiple names for blackness, and even a casual thought about the “one drop rule” that Jordan questions and it is easy to realize that the very nature of what blackness is is to question and problematize itself. Blackness in Western thought is a boundary of understanding...the dark continent, darkest Africa, black brute, thug, ghetto...even the criticisms of Kendrick Lamar’s performance at the Super Bowl. The association of these terms and images have all aligned blackness as something obscure, an impossibility and a mystery...a danger. The result is that “blackness” in and of itself is a question.

I did a whole sermon on the “N-word” several years ago in which I explained to the congregation that I wanted them to understand that this one word is not just a challenge. It is a global weapon. It is the most universal American export. I have heard the word on all five of the continents I’ve been to. I’ve heard the word spoken by people who don’t speak English and while some will counter that people of African descent have “reclaimed” the word in Rap music and pop culture, that hasn’t diminished its violence, it has simply spread its use; similar to the way DEI is being used as its own undoing. The particular violence of that word works in two ways. It can be aimed at someone who is of African descent like a firearm and deployed in a brutally final way...or dropped casually and carelessly. It can also be aimed at someone who is not of African descent to diminish them and lower them socially, culturally, intellectually, sexually to a perceived state of “lesser-human” that is associated uniquely with blackness. We study blackness every time we say any of the words for blackness.

I was driving up to the church last week and saw the wayside pulpit...the sign outside with the word “Blackness” on it and I thought to myself, that’s probably a first.

Lord knows what people are thinking seeing it. Hopefully though, they are thinking.
Hopefully we all are.

How Does Your Whiteness Work?

How does your whiteness work?
Does it fill you with pride
Does it make you ashamed
Does whiteness call you to action
Or does it allow you to hide?
Does whiteness give you a pass
Is it just a pain in the ass
How does your whiteness work?

How does my blackness work?
My blackness is a portal
It gives me a place from which to see the world
My world
Your world
It gives me perspective
It would have to.
My blackness stands upon innumerable bodies sacrificed
To the nonconsensual concept of race
Applied, and reapplied
And applied again
Like layers of makeup on Baby Jane Hudson.

My blackness swims in the blood of too many ancestors
Never repaid for their gifts
And dives daily into the pool from an impossible height
Not the sparkling Esther Williams spectacle
As she plunges into the blue water dotted with identical white faces
But the thick, dark crimson of effort an unknowability
That comes from a history erased.
My blackness is knowledge
I hold it carefully
And share it sparingly
Because too much would bring the end of the world.
That's how my blackness works.

How does your whiteness work?
Are you willing to find out?
Do you even want to know?
If not...why is that so.