

# Historical Origins of the One-Drop Racial Rule in the United States

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

*Winthrop Jordan was one of the most honored US historians of the second half of the twentieth century. His subjects were race, gender, sex, slavery, and religion, and he wrote almost exclusively about the early centuries of American history. One of his first published articles, "American Chiaroscuro: The Status and Definition of Mulattoes in the British Colonies" (1962), may be considered an intellectual forerunner of multiracial studies, as it described the high degree of social and sexual mixing that occurred in the early centuries between Africans and Europeans in what later became the United States, and hinted at the subtle racial positionings of mixed people in those years.*<sup>3</sup>

*Jordan's first book, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812*, was published in 1968 at the height of the Civil Rights Movement era. The product of years of painstaking archival research, attentive to the nuances of the thousands of documents that are its sources, and written in sparkling prose, *White over Black* showed as no previous book had done the subtle psycho-social origins of the American racial caste system.<sup>4</sup> It won the National Book Award, the Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize, the Bancroft Prize, the Parkman Prize, and other honors. It has never been out of print since, and it remains a staple of the graduate school curriculum for American historians and scholars of ethnic studies. In 2005, the eminent public intellectual Gerald Early, at the request of the African American magazine *American Legacy*, listed what he believed to be the ten most influential books on African American history. *White over Black* ranked second behind *W. E. B. Du Bois's Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>5</sup>*

*Jordan published a condensed version of *White over Black* in 1974 under the title, *The White Man's Burden: The Historical Origins of Racism in the United States*, as well as several textbooks, anthologies of essays, and collections of documents.<sup>6</sup> He remained an active scholar and mentor into the 2000s, and he won a second Bancroft Prize for his 1993 monograph, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy*, an exemplary piece of historical detection about a slave rebellion conspiracy that may or may not have been planned, and may or may not have taken place, near Natchez, Mississippi.<sup>7</sup>*

*I had the extraordinary good fortune to enter the graduate history program at the University of California, Berkeley, in the fall of 1974. Among the young professors there were Leon Litwack, Lawrence Levine, and Winthrop Jordan, who would emerge as three of the most important US historians of their generation. Kenneth Stampp was a revered elder scholar in the department. Albert Raboteau joined them the following year. Thus Berkeley was home to five of the most influential historians of African America. All five were kind to me, none more so than Winthrop Jordan. He was the first professor to think I might have a future in the history business and to invest some time in helping me find my way. He made a similar investment in scores of graduate students and thousands of undergraduates over the course of his career. All of his former students can attest to his loathing for the glib generalization and his insistence that we listen carefully to the sources—not just to what they say, but also asking the psychologist's question, "Why did they say it that way?"—feeling our way through the documents to the human lives that lie behind them.<sup>8</sup>*

*In 1982, Winthrop Jordan moved from Berkeley to Oxford, Mississippi, where he became the William F. Winter Professor of History and Afro-American Studies at the University of Mississippi and*

*continued to teach for more than two decades. We lost Winthrop Jordan in 2007, after several years of declining health caused by cancer and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease. His wife Cora gave me the manuscript—a meditation on the origins and consequences of America's famous one-drop racial rule—on which he spent what scholarly energy he could muster during the last years of his life. She asked me to edit it for publication, but, alas, I was not able to complete the task before Cora Jordan died in 2011.*

*With this essay, Professor Jordan brought his writing full circle, back to the questions that animated "American Chiaroscuro" nearly half a century before. Who is Black? Who is White? How did these racial categories come to be? In a starkly racialized social structure like that of the United States, how have people been defined and slotted into their places in the racial system? What has happened to people of mixed racial ancestry? What gave rise to the one-drop rule in the United States and what purposes has it served over the centuries? How have racial placements and possibilities been different for mixed people who did not have any known African ancestry than for those who did? What parts have biology and culture played in these matters? What does the future hold for America's one-drop racial rule?*

*Jordan wrote at least three versions of his final essay over the years 2004–2007. Since his death, I have struggled to figure out which of these versions was closest to his vision, and how to pull the three together into a single narrative. I hope I have achieved something he would find acceptable in the present essay, offered for publication in the inaugural issue of the Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies. At Cora Jordan's instruction, I have also filled in the footnotes, which were only rudimentary in the drafts that Professor Jordan left. Fortunately, I have his typed notes, which show him to have read and formed opinions about nearly every book and article that touched even remotely on racial mixture and the one-drop rule.<sup>9</sup>*

*Here, then, is "Historical Origins of the One-Drop Racial Rule in the United States."*



## **THE ONE-DROP RULE: THE US ANOMALY AND ITS FATEFUL CONSEQUENCES<sup>10</sup>**

Historians and scholars in other disciplines have generated a huge corpus of studies about the concept of race while ignoring, for the most part, one of the most important features of race relations in the United States. 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. Basically, by this social rule, a person was, and is, either black or not. Any person of racially or ethnically mixed descent who has some "Negro blood" has been or still is regarded as "colored," or "African," or "Negro," or "black," or "Afro-American," or "African American"—whatever designation has prevailed by convention at the time. 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.

When it comes to race, Americans see themselves, and many overseas people as well, in a bi-colored fashion—either/or—black or white. Surely this is an interesting chromometric assessment of skin complexion. We should ask ourselves *why* nearly all the people playing on basketball courts are said to be one of the same two colors as piano keys. For one thing, no human being has a complexion

that is fully black or completely white. And all these players, whether white or black, have a light and dark side of their hands. In addition, bifurcating these or any people subtly negates the underlying unity of humankind and its common genetic and historical roots.<sup>11</sup>

In the United States some medical geneticists have blithely ignored the one-drop rule while urging genetic profiles of different races as they relate to susceptibility to different diseases. These proposals have been strongly denounced by some geneticists and by scholars in other disciplines who point to the obvious fact that a great many socially defined African Americans have a genetic background that is far less than even fifty percent African. Historians have been less prone to disagreement among themselves, but they have simply been neglectful about asking how and why this social rule developed. The focus in this inquiry is on the social aspects of the rule, and thus the definition of the rule used here is somewhat broader than is necessary when discussing the genetics of its operation.<sup>12</sup>

The term “one-drop rule” has its own rather curious history. It was used repeatedly in scholarly works on race relations more than a generation ago. Today, it can be found in a wide variety of publications that deal with race relations in the United States. Yet the lexical community has been either negligent or resistant about the term, for as of a very few years ago, *all* the purportedly unabridged dictionaries of the English language and their updated collegiate versions did not include it. These dictionaries have begun to catch up as dictionaries and facsimiles like Wikipedia have become ubiquitous online. Even the venerable *Oxford English Dictionary*, which is supposedly based on historical principles, has an online version that now includes the term. The phrase currently appears in many books, magazines, and on the Internet, firmly supported by its conciseness in referring to a powerful social rule.<sup>13</sup>

African Americans have necessarily had a different experience than whites with this rule. After the Civil War and prior to the mid-1960’s, many people then called “Negroes”—at least those middle-class people who could—adopted white values about complexion and hair, and many older African Americans can still remember battling with chemical lighteners and straighteners. As is well known, however, with the second civil rights movement, many African Americans embraced Negroid appearance as an emblem of their commitment to that battle. As will become clear, however, this sense of common interest among African Americans is far older than the recent civil rights era, for it first appeared in parts of the American colonies prior to the American Revolution and showed signs of strengthening in the young republic in the years following. Following the more radical years of the late 1960s and 1970s, the pendulum swung back. Since the 1980s African Americans and others have placed substantial value on light coloring, straight hair, and European-derived facial features, to the point where sales of skin and hair products, and even cosmetic surgery, have skyrocketed.<sup>14</sup>

For mixed-race people, individual personal struggles with the color line also have a long history. Frederick Douglass recorded his handling of its difficulties in 1848 while on his way to a Negro convention in Buffalo. After boarding a lake steamer, Douglass accepted a spontaneous invitation by his fellow passengers to give a speech. Afterwards he learned that a certain white passenger had announced his disagreement with a point made by Douglass and had declared that he would not “discuss this question with a *nigger*.” In response, Douglass passed word to this critic “that he was much mistaken in supposing me to be a nigger, that I was but a half negro—that my *Dear Father* was as white as himself, and if he could not condescend to reply to negro blood, to reply to the European blood.” In such instances, however, the one-drop rule itself was not in dispute; indeed at times many American blacks have actually reinforced its dominance as a social norm.<sup>15</sup>

Discerning the historical reasons underlying the one-drop rule raises important evidentiary and conceptual problems. The brief explications in this article deal with various facets of the rule in hopes that this discussion will collectively and tentatively suggest why it came into being. One crucial

dimension of the one-drop rule is its uniqueness (with a single exception as will become clear). Today, many foreign observers from other parts of the Americas are so differently socialized that they find the rule nearly impossible to understand. We do indeed need to inquire why the rule developed in the United States and not elsewhere in the Caribbean and in Latin America, that is, in other colonies and later in independent nations that were all part of the overall European and African settlement of the New World after Columbus.

Another important attribute of this social classification is so obvious that it has often been overlooked, though it needs only a brisk statement here. The rule applies primarily to people of mixed African-European background, and not to other patterns of so-called “racial intermixture.” It does *not* apply to people whose apparent heritage is confined to some combination of Caucasian, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American ancestry. It applies *only* to Americans of entirely or partially *African* descent. Race in the United States has never been just about white and black. But to make the task of this essay manageable, the discussion here will attend mainly to European- and African-descended Americans—the ones on whom the one-drop rule has fallen most heavily.<sup>16</sup>

A far more complex facet of the rule concerns the apparently simple matter of dating its beginnings. Here we run into serious difficulties, primarily because extant references to its existence are uncommon and appear in few widely scattered sources. Indeed this brief study depends on a mere handful of such references, and the likelihood of others having escaped the author’s attention is virtually guaranteed.<sup>17</sup>

Color is viewed as the most predominant physiognomic feature of racial distinction. After all, we have been using either a Portuguese/Spanish or an English designation of color—*Negro/black*—in connection with Africans for many centuries. While differences in hair and facial features are recognized, they are not frequently commented upon in public in the dominant white society; skin color has been and remains the most important social marker, with the configuration of hair, nose width, lips and other features often used as secondary reinforcements. All these markers are *facial*, a fact that underscores the importance of sheer public appearance in social situations.

The anomalies for personal identity resulting from the one-drop rule are apparently never-ending. It has meant our having had a Miss America, Vanessa Williams, who was called “black” even though her ancestry was apparently much more European than African.<sup>18</sup> The same might be said of General Colin Powell, who remains “African American” largely by his own assertion. This particular personal choice is not new: the prominent nineteenth-century abolitionist, Robert Purvis, who was born and raised in South Carolina and moved to Philadelphia. There he was often told that he was light enough to pass for white, but he continued to live as a black man in both his private and public life.<sup>19</sup> The complexion and features of actress-model Halle Berry are such that her visually perceived race can vary greatly depending on lighting, makeup, and camera angle. The same rule has also operated with a professional golfer, Tiger Woods, who has mounted a losing personal battle to resist it. His mixed ancestry is Thai, Chinese, American Indian, Dutch, and African American. Yet in this country he has been hailed as “black” throughout his career. Without hesitancy the US media, both white and African American, have described him consistently with such phrases as “the Great Black Hope,” “the first Black to win the U.S. Amateur,” and “a 19-year-old who just happens to be black.”<sup>20</sup> Woods has fought this designation with public objections, by checking “Asian” on his census form, and by inventing his own term—“Cablinasian” (for Caucasian, Black, Indian and Asian). Such battles are very old. Two hundred years after their alleged long-term liaison, the numerous descendants of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson (or possibly one of his male relatives) are today grouped in two categories both by the media and by themselves—the “black” descendants and the “white” ones.<sup>21</sup>

It is also important to recognize that the rule has frequently been violated. There have been a rather small number of isolated local pockets occupied by people who were openly acknowledged to

be of two- or three-way intra-mixtures.<sup>22</sup> In more heavily settled areas, sheer reputation has occasionally overridden the rule. The courts at many levels have treated it gingerly and with stunning inconsistency, and state statutes have variously tried to skirt it or to reinforce it with fractional exactitudes that themselves have varied greatly over time. In general, however, the law has tended increasingly either to tighten the rule or to give up trying to define it with a written definition. Nonetheless, the rule has operated socially with a power not seen in any other country, with a revealing exception in the British West Indies that will need our attention.

The appalling dissonances in this social system have affected both blacks and whites. Preferences in skin color (as well as hair form) have been and remain so complex for both groups that they can only be summarized here, without more than alluding to the dimensions of gender that so strongly affect their operation. As most Americans are aware, a relatively light complexion has had positive personal and social value, especially among African Americans but also among whites. In many black families and communities, there remain personal biases in favor of lightness, a long-established, flexible set of preferences that have not been entirely destroyed by 1960s–1970s public and personal campaigns summed up by the slogan “black is beautiful.” Nor have whites entirely lost their traditional biases for a light complexion among black people and, indeed, among themselves at least among those still committed to a muted version of old-fashioned Nordicism. Less studied and commented upon is a common but far from universal negative response among African Americans to whites with very light complexions. Indeed, a great many African Americans are far more sensitive than most whites to gradations in color in all people, and out of necessity for many years they have had to deal with the social rule about race imposed by the dominant culture. For present purposes this paper will avoid these and other complications, for there is danger here of veering off into an exceedingly swampy field of idiosyncratic, elusive, and highly variable valuations, a place long populated by popular magazines, curious social scientists, ambitious advertising agencies, and assorted myth- and trouble-makers, as they all speculate knowingly about such weighty icons as Aunt Jemima, Lady Clairol, and “good” hair.<sup>23</sup>

All these valuations exist within a confined space of social definition. As a pasture of changing ambiguities, they are fenced in rigidly by the one-drop rule. Yet they are far from being the sole aspect of that rule’s dissonant nature. At a theoretical level, the rule unsteadily perches on a rigid and arbitrary dividing line between the social and the biological sciences. Until a century ago, almost everyone assumed that “blood” was the conveyor of physical inheritance.<sup>24</sup> In this genetic age, it is almost astonishing that the term *blood* has moved back into scholarly discourse when the very people who use it know perfectly well that blood is not the transmitter of inherited characteristics in human or other living beings.

Another anomaly in this concept is more ironic. The conclusions of archeology, paleontology, and evolutionary biology join in the finding that it is highly probable that all human beings are of African descent. The species *Homo sapiens* originated in the northeastern part of Africa, along the Great Rift Valley, with some possibility of emergence also in the southern regions of the continent. Those parts of the continent were no more the direct cradles of African Americans than of Euro-Americans or Native Americans, since only a small number of the people living in eastern and southern Africa were caught up in the Atlantic slave trade that began in the sixteenth century. Except in the very early years of the trade, almost all the forced migrants from Africa to the Americas originally came from the western portions of the African continent, a huge expanse of coastal and near-coastal regions that stretched for some three thousand miles from the Sahara desert in the north to the Namibian desert in the south. Only a small proportion—some five percent—came from homelands on the huge island of Madagascar and along the southeastern African coast. Yet if one goes back far enough in time, all Americans, including the first settlers from Asia whom Columbus called

“Indians” and the more numerous later immigrants from Africa, Europe, and Asia, may also be accurately described as being—very distantly in time—“of African descent.”

### **CONFLICTING RULES: ANGLO AND LATIN NORTH AMERICA**

These considerations explain why many modern historical discussions of the rule have focused on the law as written out in statutes and court decisions. Yet reliance on the law in itself presents several problems in addition to dating, as will later become clear. For now, it is enough to point to the unsurprising fact that expressions in formal law appear later than evidence of perceptions and practices that were customary long before they were written down.<sup>25</sup>

The initial concept underlying the term is actually several hundred years old, though it was not present at the beginning of Euro-African settlement since interracial mixture took time to produce offspring. The slaves imported into the colonies along the eastern coastline of Anglo North America were African in cultural background and appearance. Throughout this huge expanse, it took some time before anything like a mulatto population developed. Where people of mixed European and African ancestry were born in mounting numbers, early statutes regulating slaves in many colonies commonly added the words “and mulattoes” after “negroes”—a shift that acknowledged the growth of a new class of persons about whom initially there was some doubt, but who were by this wording lumped with blacks. Such lumping assured that these children would remain part of the slave population, thus serving the interests of people who owned them.

There were important regional variations among these seaboard colonies. On the eve of the American Revolution, blacks composed about twenty percent of the total population of the continental colonies (excluding “Indians not taxed”). Virginia was by far the most populous of the southern colonies, and it was more than forty percent black. The proportions in Delaware, Maryland, and North Carolina were approximately a third or somewhat less. Still farther south, the colony of South Carolina, even after its social and economic extension into lowcountry Georgia, had about sixty percent—its well-known “black majority.”<sup>26</sup> From the earliest years of settlement these southern colonies had a much higher proportion of blacks than those north of what later became known as the Mason-Dixon Line.<sup>27</sup> North of that line, the black population ranged upwards from about three percent in several colonies to a high of fourteen percent in New York City. To the south (roughly) of the line, warmer climates and longer growing seasons encouraged cultivation of labor-intensive staple crops. By about the beginning of the eighteenth century the geographical pattern of slave numbers on the East Coast was becoming clear, with what became thirteen colonies divided into four subregions: New England, the middle colonies from Pennsylvania northward, the Chesapeake colonies, and the Carolinas and (later) Georgia.<sup>28</sup>

As for geographical variations in adoption of the one-drop rule, most of the few historians who have written about the matter have followed a line of thought first laid down in 1980, which stressed the pronounced difference between the old Upper South (the Chesapeake) and the Carolinas, with the one-drop rule developing much earlier in the former region and not until the 1850s in the latter.<sup>29</sup> While there are indeed some signs that the rule may have come into operation in the Upper South well before it became dominant in the Lower South, emphasis on this pattern has involved several missteps. One derives from the incorrect presumption that preferential treatment of mulattoes, which was most obvious in South Carolina, logically prevented development of a one-drop social rule. Another difficulty has been the over-homogenization of the entire Lower South by inclusion of states and urban centers that were predominantly French and/or Spanish in governance, settlement, and culture—most notably Louisiana. While this line of argument placed emergence of the rule first in the Chesapeake and then much later in the Lower South, it gave no indication as to what happened in the

northern colonies and states. The most recent study of the rule makes the startling claim, however, that the southern states borrowed the rule from the North.<sup>30</sup> For the moment, therefore, while holding discussion of the situation in South Carolina and Charleston in abeyance, we can turn to the largely neglected northern colonies and states.

The earliest indisputable evidence of the rule's existence in the North comes in the 1790s from the comments of Moreau de St. Méry, a French attorney and historian who lived for years on the French West Indian island of Martinique and later spent a five year sojourn running a bookstore in Philadelphia as a refugee from the Terror of the French Revolution. In that important American city he came close to expressing surprise as he described the prevailing racial classifications: under the heading "Colored People," Moreau stated explicitly that "Under this heading I include all persons not white, but free and descended from the African Race. [They]...live entirely among themselves without distinguishing between mulattoes, griffes, Negroes and quadroons, who are extremely rare." It would be hard to imagine a more explicit, unambiguous description of the one-drop rule. In addition, these observations in the 1790s included no suggestion that this peculiarly American rule was a recent development. This was some four decades before the rule was fully promulgated in legal sources.<sup>31</sup>

Almost undoubtedly, the driving force behind early adoption of the one-drop rule in the North was provided by free blacks as they reacted to the thousands of cuts of racial hostility that came from whites on a daily basis. Prior to the Revolution, the great majority of blacks in the North were slaves, but the community of free blacks was growing even before the great wave of private and public emancipation that came with the Revolution. Freed blacks who did not already live in major port cities tended to migrate there or to smaller towns. In these urban settings free blacks were crowded into disease-ridden slums and they ran into discrimination when seeking jobs; indeed they were living in "the ghetto" long before the word was first used in this connection.<sup>32</sup>

Free blacks reacted to their situation by banding together in their own organizations, often churches but also including fraternal societies such as the Masons. More dramatically, in the larger cities blacks developed annual festivals that included costumes, public parades, drinking bouts, election of state "governors," and after the Revolution celebrations of key dates for blacks such as emancipation laws and bans on the Atlantic slave trade. Anyone identifying him- or herself as "black" or "African" felt free to participate. In short, having been separated by custom and by law, blacks separated themselves in Northern cities.<sup>33</sup>

Racial definitions developed very differently in several other regions of what is now the United States, most conspicuously in those originally dominated by Latin cultures. The most immediately obvious of these was southern Louisiana, including New Orleans, together with a few smaller French enclaves such as Mobile, Alabama. The period of Spanish governance did little to reshape French culture in these areas, though there was more Spanish influence in West Florida, including Pensacola. Overlaying the original bedrock of French culture in southern Louisiana was the immigration of both blacks and whites from Francophone revolutionary Haiti in the years around 1800. The resultant pattern of race relations rendered the area a conspicuous exception in any discussion of the one-drop rule in the United States as a whole, and also from the old Lower South.<sup>34</sup>

Another interracial society in the present continental United States also rested on cultural origins that were markedly distinctive from the predominantly Anglo and African cultural settlements. The huge southwestern part of the United States was dominated culturally by a long period of colonial Spanish settlement and rule. Hispanic treatment of racial intermixture followed a very different pattern than prevailed in non-Latin regions. Many Hispanics today continue a long tradition of denial that African-Spanish intermixture was frequent enough to take into much account, and indeed they still think of *mestizaje* as essentially an Hispanic-Indian phenomenon with its own

social rules. As with French culture, areas of Spanish culture in the present United States may be set aside from our discussion of the one-drop rule, except for purposes of comparative contrast.<sup>35</sup>

In both these two major exceptions to the larger geographical and numerical pattern of Anglo-dominated settlement in the New World, the cultures of the metropolitan, colonizing nations were close to making a determinative difference in emergent patterns of racial definitions. By implication they strengthen the assumption that Anglo-dominated areas of early settlement were strongly influenced by the culture of the dominant settlers.

## RACE, GENDER, AND DEMOGRAPHICS: THE CRITICAL DIFFERENCE

Another facet of the development of the one-drop rule in the United States concerns relations with the Indians. In the thirteen continental colonies, there were indeed sexual contacts between the new settlers from the Old World—both white and black—and the earlier ones from Asia. But in comparison with the French and Spanish in the Americas, such contacts were infrequent. In part, this relative infrequency can be accounted for by the fact that the eastern woodland Indians were far less numerous than those in many areas from Mexico southwards. It also derived in part from the presence of relatively more European women, a development that was due to immigration and even more to the relative good health of the North American colonists. In the long run, there were far fewer people born in the British continental colonies whose racial backgrounds had the messy quality of three-way racial intermixture, and thus such mixture in North America came to be seen by most people as normally a two-way affair. And white settlers in the British colonies though sexual intermixture with Indians stood in a very different category from such contact with people of African descent. Thomas Jefferson was not alone in hoping for a gradual melding of the Indians with Anglo-Americans in his growing empire of liberty.

It is especially revealing that the one-drop rule never applied to the intermixture of Indians with whites, or Indians with members of any other such group except blacks. The one-drop rule did and does *not* apply to American people whose apparent heritage is confined to some combination of Caucasian, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American ancestry.<sup>36</sup> It applies *only* to the United States and there to Americans of entirely or partially *African* descent. One well-known apparent exception throws this restricted application into sharp relief: when young men come to this country from the Dominican Republic to play professional baseball, they are called—no matter how heavily African they are in ancestry and appearance—not “blacks” but “Dominicans.”<sup>37</sup>

With that irony in mind, we can turn to the most glittering of the various facets of the one-drop rule. Historically and to the present day this rule has operated most powerfully and rigidly in only one major portion of what Europeans called the “New World”—the portion that became the United States. Today, North Americans so naturally assume its validity, applicability, and its essential consonance with nature that they rarely pause to consider that racial definitions might be different elsewhere—which they most emphatically are.

In these other parts of the Americas—in Central and South America and the Caribbean islands, for example—the rule does not prevail. People living in these areas manage to exist and even thrive in a teeming spectrum of phenotypes and physiognomies. Over many centuries of European and African settlement, this spectrum was so thoroughly built into these cultures that, especially in the Spanish and Portuguese languages, an accumulation of more than a score of names emerged with which to describe various degrees of racial intermixture. The complicated nature of this social system is illustrated by the following eighteenth-century list of terms used in the Viceroyalty of New Spain, what we now call Mexico.



1. Spaniard and Indian beget mestizo
2. Mestizo and Spanish woman beget castizo
3. Castizo woman and Spaniard beget Spaniard
4. Spanish woman and Negro beget mulatto
5. Spaniard and mulatto woman beget morisco
6. Morisco woman and Spaniard beget albino
7. Spaniard and albino woman beget torna atrás
8. Indian and torna atrás beget lobo
9. Lobo and Indian woman beget zambaigo
10. Zambaigo and Indian woman beget cambujo
11. Cambujo and mulatto woman beget albarazado
12. Albarazado and mulatto woman beget barcino
13. Barcino and mulatto woman beget coyote
14. Coyote woman and Indian beget chamiso
15. Chamiso woman and mestizo beget coyote mestizo
16. Coyote mestizo and mulatto woman beget ahí te estás<sup>38</sup>

The careful reader will immediately detect that this complicated system of names included gender as an important element in its classifications. This eighteenth-century list, it will be noted, also assumed a three-way interaction between Spanish, African, and Indian people that was contrary to the biracial system that came to predominate in North America. In the British continental colonies, the term *mustee* (variously spelled) was the only word besides *negro* and *mulatto* used for intermixture between other races. It referred to the offspring of an Indian and a Negro (or less often a white person) and was used primarily in South Carolina, Georgia, and less commonly New York—that is, in those colonies where such unions took place with relative frequency. But the term largely disappeared in the years after the American Revolution.<sup>39</sup>

In Spanish America, compilation of lists of intermixtures began in the sixteenth century, remarkably early and reflecting the feudal thinking of the Spanish bureaucracy in particular. Once again, however, such lists require careful reading: a list compiled by the Council of Provincial Mexico for the Pope and the Spanish king in 1585, less than a century after Columbus's first voyage, listed twenty-two names of racial mixtures and their resulting offspring, but it also showed indirectly that while mulattoes could be turned into white Spaniards after five more generations of racial intermixture with Spaniards, the same process required only three generations with Indians. However, by the end of the colonial period (a much longer one than occurred in North America), the usefulness of such terminology was becoming so thoroughly corroded by further intermixture that it was impossible to discern who fell into exactly which category.<sup>40</sup>

Even today, in all these linguistically Spanish- and Portuguese-dominated societies, people are lighter or darker, with differing hair, and so on; but they are not, and cannot be, socially split into just two distinct categories.<sup>41</sup> People of various genetic backgrounds from the Old World are indeed assessed by color and other physical attributes, but they are not seen as either/or, nor as being essentially a member of just this, or just that, social category. Socio-economic assessments of class often override distinctions in color, as capsulized in the famous Brazilian phrase, "money whitens."<sup>42</sup>

These Latin-dominated cultures share with the United States a common presumption: the lighter the better and the darker the worse. Thus they reflect a similar assumption of superiority for people of European background, but they do not share with the United States a rigidly bifurcated system of classifying human beings.

Why and how did this Anglo-Latin difference come about? The answer is both simple and complex. On the one hand, the most important single factor was a set of supposedly straightforward demographic facts. It is also complex, however, because the demographic facts have not been firmly established beyond question and because other more subtle factors have also shaped the process.

We do need to attend to certain demographic peculiarities in the pattern of migration from Africa and Europe to the Americas. First, it is important to bear in mind that before about the year 1890, more Africans than Europeans crossed the Atlantic Ocean. There were significant cultural differences among the peoples from West and West Central Africa, but it is also important that the vast majority of victims of the Atlantic slave trade ended up in the tropical rather than the temperate parts of the New World, primarily but not always in lowland rather than mountainous areas. The geographical portion of the New World that became what is now the United States received only about five or six percent of all the victims of the Atlantic slave trade. This minor contingent of forced migrants ended up in the largest stretch of temperate, coastal lowlands in all the Americas.

The entire traffic in African human beings was weighted toward men, but recent research demonstrates that the gender ratio among those taken to the tropics was nothing like the two-to-one that has traditionally been claimed. Males did indeed outnumber females but not by such a striking margin. After the African victims arrived in the New World they suffered an appalling death rate. But mortality was considerably lower in temperate British North America than elsewhere. Thus both the formation of slave families was easier and the production of offspring greater in the thirteen British continental colonies than in any other major part of the Americas. Indeed, by the eighteenth century, these colonies were probably the only ones in the Americas where the slave population reproduced itself and even grew by natural increase.<sup>43</sup>

As a result especially of the sugar revolution, black Africans came to vastly outnumber the European populations of major lowland, tropical areas, notably the West Indies, Surinam, and, most especially, northeastern Brazil. Black-white ratios in the various Caribbean islands ran as high as ten to one. Historians have traditionally emphasized these proportions, but they have paid much less attention to Indian-European ratios. The Spanish and the Portuguese (and the Dutch to a less striking extent) had to deal with very large numbers and concentrations of native Indians. However much these populations were decimated by Old World diseases, the pre-Columbian population densities of central Mexico, the Yucatan region, and Peru initially may well have been as high as those of the European colonizing nations taken as a whole. At the time of the Spanish conquest, central Mexico's density of native inhabitants per square mile may have approached even the concentrations of people in the Netherlands and southern England.<sup>44</sup>

European patterns of migration had an even more important bearing on the development of the one-drop rule. Most of these Europeans came from the newly founded, predominantly monarchical nations in the western parts of Europe, namely from the five Atlantic nations of Spain, Portugal, France, the Netherlands, and England. The populations of these nations varied greatly, with France and Spain having by far the largest numbers of people.

The newly unified Tudor English nation, which further expanded into Great Britain in 1707, appears to have sent to the New World very approximately some seven times the absolute number of French migrants by 1760.<sup>45</sup> Fully as important, the numerous Spanish settlers wound up principally in those parts of the Americas that were most densely populated by Indians, while the French took over portions of North America and the West Indies where the Indian populations were downright sparse by comparison. In general, a considerable majority of the migrants from Europe were voluntary, if that term may be used to include subservient children, most of the women, and all those driven by poverty to seek refuge in distant lands. Yet an important number of European migrants were scarcely voluntary at all: many were obliged to mortgage their future labor in the Americas for

terms of years, and—at the far end of the spectrum of willingness—convicts, prisoners-of-war, and victims of kidnappings were close to being as fully forced as were the migrants from Africa.<sup>46</sup>

The pattern of gender among all the European migrants was more heavily male than the overall migration from Africa. Yet the Anglo/British continental colonies stand out as a conspicuous exception because the gender ratios of migrants to those colonies as a whole soon came to be closer (but not close) to equality than elsewhere in the Americas. Clearly there were regional and temporal differences in this respect among these colonies. New England had a much higher proportion of female immigrants than the continental colonies further south. Yet for those continental colonies with markedly lower proportions, as for example in early Virginia, authorities thought that ultimate success of the enterprise depended on importing more women from home. A Virginia Company letter noted “that the plantation can never flourish till families be planted and the respect of wives and children fix the people on the soil.”<sup>47</sup> Yet neither religious ties nor encouragements from home fully accounted for the relatively even sex ratio in the British continental colonies. That phenomenon was owing most of all to the rapid natural increase of a population that was, after the initial years of settlement, unusually healthy by standards of that era.

Another dimension of the European migration concerns the proportion of the home population that migrated across the Atlantic. That proportion was highest among the English, joined as they later were by the Celtic populations of Scotland and Ireland, many of whom were English-speaking and were in process of being politically and in some measure culturally assimilated into Great Britain. Portugal’s migration was England’s closest rival in this respect, but Portuguese emigrants to Brazil were greatly outnumbered by the forced migrants from Africa.

While it is easy to generalize about these patterns of migration, it should be borne in mind that such generalizations rest on somewhat shaky ground if one merely asks in all innocence what and how historians actually knew about the great Atlantic migrations of the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and even nineteenth centuries. As the result of one recent major data-gathering project, more is known, ironically, about the migrations from Africa than those from Europe.<sup>48</sup> With European migrations, owing to huge lacunae in the original records concerning emigrations (and to even greater spottiness of records about immigrations), demographic historians do not actually know nearly as much as they would like to about these phenomena. There are conspicuous exceptions for certain nations and colonies, for identifiable Old World ports and certain random years, but canvasses of existing data have turned up enormous gaps in space and time. Thus, generalizations about total numbers and about age and gender—for all nations and colonies and over long periods of time—remain guesses more than firm estimates. For example, one may take the firmly established fact that the sex ratio of migrants to the New England colonies was much closer to equality of gender than in the other continental colonies further south. While valuable, this finding does not take us very far. The overall paucity of original data for the Americas is worsened by the rarity of information about reverse migration back to Europe. Historians whose main interest is the United States are lucky that the scattered data are considerably more plentiful for the English-speaking Atlantic world than for the other colonizing nations, but this good fortune melts away when attempting national comparisons.<sup>49</sup>

## **WE AND THEY**

The social effects of these patterns were exactly what one might expect from that pre-postmodern refuge of many historians—common sense. Put baldly, in comparison to other New World Colonies, Anglo North American men saw on a daily basis more women who looked and spoke like women at home. There is no need to resort to a buzzword like “somatic norm image” in order to appreciate the importance of this sensibility.<sup>50</sup> Some of these colonial women, especially servants,

were “available” in two meanings of that word. Fewer of these men were under pressure and/or felt entirely free to develop what would later be called “interracial” liaisons—usually forced but sometimes consensual, often temporary but occasionally of long standing. Certainly some did so, especially in areas where there were more blacks than whites, but demographic realities were enough to make such relationships much less common in eastern North America than elsewhere in the Americas, including the British colonies in the Caribbean. Indeed in the British continental colonies there were enough white women to permit development of sexual contacts between a small number of white women with men of African descent. In sum, what have been called “interracial mixtures” did in fact occur in North America with considerable frequency from the seventeenth century and ever since, but much less commonly than in the other European-dominated New World colonies.<sup>51</sup>

The psychological and social results of these patterns are not easy to delineate, yet they were nonetheless very real. Formation and retention of family ties were more likely when demographic realities encouraged them. In the early years of settlement in the English colonies, an unknown number of men went back to England and then returned in company with members of their families who had previously stayed behind. Affective devotion to and consciousness of group similarity and solidarity was likely to grow as time passed, as one generation followed another in procession and as the separate colonies developed institutions such as neighborhoods, towns, churches, trading enterprises, and colony-wide governments. Despite geographical mobility in their colonies, the British settlers especially were the most likely to develop emotional attachments and affective connections with people who looked like themselves on both sides of the Atlantic. The development of the affective norms that served as essential supports for families, especially those with children, necessarily accompanied this sense of common group experience. The maturing of generation after generation helped solidify the self-identifications of people who were “we” as opposed to those who were “they.” This process could only have been hastened and strengthened by the most frequent kinds of violence in those colonies—warfare against Indians, and the daily use of force to govern slaves.

## **CULTURES OF COLONIZATION**

Several other clusters of historical circumstances also shaped the development of the one-drop rule in this country. During the early years of colonization from western Europe and western Africa, two of the five principal Atlantic nations were in the vanguard of the development of commercial capitalism. Many people in the southern parts of England and the northern parts of the Netherlands were becoming increasingly tied to the rigidities and constraints of contracts, clock time, bookkeeping, and celestial navigation. Such precision carried with it important wider implications, since it structured into both those cultures a craving for exactitude and control. This mounting itch inevitably carried over into the manner in which one assessed the very nature of social differences in one’s own society and of people in others. It seems to have included a slight but unmistakable rise in the status of women; they were taking an increasing part in the commercial economy in the British colonies as widowed owners of shops, taverns, and printing establishments. In England itself, this new mood derived in large part from conservative hostility to the new turmoil of a roiling, rapidly changing society and from much older attachments to social stability and clear categorizations of people. Both the turmoil and the craving first became obvious in the sixteenth century, during the expansion of Europeans overseas, and both attributes were intimately intertwined with that venturing.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast to the English, both nations of the Iberian Peninsula remained more medieval in important respects, and they were located in a very different part of western Europe. Without for present purposes venturing into an examination of Spanish and Portuguese societies in the sixteenth

century, it is worth pointing to their centuries-long reconquest of their homeland from the Moors, a success which did so much to shape their conquests in the Americas. It is also worth referring to their past experience of having been subject to these Islamic Moors who were of darker complexion, to the continued existence of slavery, attachment to the Roman church, the feudal nature of their politics and bureaucracies and the concomitant lower status of women. What the Spanish lacked most conspicuously was a flourishing, growing commercial class. The reconquest was closely associated with revitalization of the Church, the Spanish Inquisition, and the expulsion and conversion of Jews. Out of this context—so different from the English experience—emerged the ideal of *limpieza de sangre* (or purity of blood), which superficially paralleled the North American racial system but differed radically at its historical roots and thus in its implementation in the New World.

In addition, as the Iberians expanded overseas, they had close at hand a strong Islamic tradition of thought about sub-Saharan Africans that held these Africans to be inherently uncivilized and stupid. Both the Portuguese (who initiated direct contacts with Africans in the 1400s) and the Spanish were heirs of centuries of assertions that the blacks of Africa were the most beastly sort of humankind and, indeed, were natural slaves. Iberian Christians as well as Muslims for centuries had treated black slaves in a more degrading and brutal manner than white ones.<sup>53</sup>

In pronounced contrast, the English-speaking peoples were strangers to such a strong tradition. They were latecomers to the slave trade on the West African coast. They were no longer accustomed to slavery at home—a status they proudly declared no longer existed in England. They also had little direct access to the anti-black racial thought that had been circulating for centuries in Spain and Portugal, though certain translated aspects of it had filtered indirectly into their sceptered isle. As is well known, the early English settlers in Virginia groped their way gradually toward a similar line of thinking, just as in all these emerging tobacco colonies (but not elsewhere) they groped gradually with the idea and practice that blacks were ordinarily slaves.<sup>54</sup> But at the same time they were adopting this self-serving notion, the English settlers were plunging into a mode of thought that would not tolerate degrees of freedom—nor degrees of racial intermixture. One was either a white freeborn Englishman or a black slave without a home country.

Another distinctive quality of the settlement of British-dominated North America was that European settlers greatly outnumbered those from Africa. Once again we are back to demographic realities, and the figures are far firmer than those concerning gender. Each colony underwent its own experience that helped shape its demand for slave labor. Morality had little to do with the racial ratios that a century later did so much to bring about a major sectional conflict.

These differences in racial proportion did indeed have a lot to do with the development of different patterns of miscegenation in the British colonies. Where whites outnumbered blacks, interracial sex was not a widely accepted social practice. Where blacks outnumbered whites, as in South Carolina, such so-called intermixture was often openly winked at in the eighteenth century.<sup>55</sup> In the West Indian sugar islands, where blacks outnumbered whites by wide margins, it was widely acknowledged as a common fact of life. Yet only in Jamaica, the most heavily black of the British islands, did whites develop even a few terms for designating degrees of intermixture. Revealingly, these Jamaican terms all derived from Latin languages (or in one case an African one) rather than from English. In Jamaica, the word *mulatto* meant specifically one-half white, while the term *sambo* meant one-fourth, *quadroon* meant three-fourths white, and *mestize* seven-eighths white. Clearly even these few named categories collectively suggested a disposition to acknowledge the generational process of whitening rather than of blackening. Yet their very existence ran counter to the rule concerning one drop that applied in the British continental colonies.<sup>56</sup>

The Jamaican racial categories stand in sharp contrast to the situation prevailing in Barbados. Often lumped by historians as just another island of the British West Indies, the origins of settlement

in Barbados were very different than in Jamaica and in such Leeward Islands as Antigua, St. Kitts, Montserrat, and Nevis. Geographically Barbados was much larger than those tiny islands, though it was dwarfed by Jamaica. Barbados also stands out so far east in the Atlantic Ocean, upwind against the trade winds; its calm downwind anchorage often became the first port of call for ships coming from Europe and Africa. The English and African settlers landed there in the late 1620s, by which time Indians no longer lived on the island. Within a half dozen years it became unambiguously clear that the Africans were being treated as slaves for life. Fully as important, the island became the major colonial destination of English, Scottish, and Irish contractual indentured servants, as well as civil convicts, and prisoners of the Puritan (or Parliamentary) revolution in the home country. (Even today, one can hear pronounced traces of an Irish brogue in the speech of many Bajans, both black and white.) By the time of the sugar boom of the early 1640s, Barbados had a white population that was larger than Virginia's, many of whom were white servants whose lives were as miserable as the African slaves. Though that boom rapidly turned whites into a minority in comparison to black slaves, in the next centuries, Barbados had a larger proportion of whites, and a higher proportion of white women, than any other of the British-dominated West Indian islands. While this racial ratio of some twenty percent fluctuated greatly over the years, Barbados came to be thought of as "home" by many successful whites of both sexes. This sentiment stood in sharp contrast to Jamaica, where there were far fewer whites and many of those who succeeded at planting eagerly embarked for home in England.

These demographic color proportions come to special attention when one discovers that society in Barbados, along with other islands in the British West Indies, operated according to the one-drop rule. Like the other Caribbean islands, Barbados clearly also had a three-tiered classification of blacks, coloreds, and whites, but existence of this pattern did not, as some scholars have assumed, automatically negate a coinciding rule about the lightest of the "colored" people. Unlike the continental colonies, especially New England, white settlement in Barbados was conspicuously not by families, but familial relationships developed rapidly enough in the appreciable white population to prevent growth of a feeling that whites were nearly drowning in an ocean of blacks—a feeling that was nearly palpable in Jamaica and the Leeward Islands.

Direct historical evidence about the adoption of the one-drop rule in Barbados is of course not plentiful, but it is unambiguous. In 1806, one observer wrote succinctly that the title of Mrs. was never accorded to "the women of colour of all classes and description ... of whatever shade of degree..." In the mid-1830s, during the brief period of "apprenticeship" that followed formal abolition of slavery in the Empire, a British medical doctor visited the island and later published his observations about society there. Dr. William Lloyd met a free man of color who was the editor of a newspaper whom he described as "a coloured gentleman" who was "liberally educated." Lloyd found the man to be refined, intelligent, and "happily married," but he went out of his way to point out that he "has no distinguishing marks of negro complexion, and in England he would be esteemed as a gentleman, while in Barbadoes he is in some degree despised as a coloured man." Lloyd evidently thought that the term "coloured" needed definition for readers in England, and he provided a crisp one in a footnote that might almost be adopted by one of today's dictionaries: "The word colour is applied to all African descendents, however remote."<sup>57</sup>

## PASSING: CROSSING THE LINE, BREAKING THE RULE

In the English colonies as a whole, it is clear that concern about interracial mixture appeared not long after first English and African settlement. In 1630, only eleven years after the “Dutch man-o-war” sold the first Africans in Virginia, an angry court sentenced a white man “to be soundly whipped, before an assembly of Negroes and others for abusing himself to the dishonor of God and shame of Christians, by defiling his body by lying with a negro.” It is possible that the said “negro” was male rather than female, thus accounting for the court’s strong denunciation. But some twenty years later, in 1662, the elected Virginia House of Burgesses denounced fornication between persons it denoted as “any christian” and “a negro man or woman.” Two years later, the Maryland legislative assembly banned interracial marriages. A generation later, in the early 1690’s, Virginia’s House of Burgesses depreciated and depersonalized the children of interracial sexual unions by labeling them as “abominable mixture and spurious issue.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus in the early years of settlement in the Afro-British continental colonies, interracial sex was clearly a matter of considerable concern among a people who were increasingly thinking of themselves as being “white” rather than their earlier self-denotations as “Christian” or “English.” It was not until the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that whites were confronted with the problem of how to treat those offspring and in turn the members of the following generations who were born with mounting various inherited backgrounds.

The earliest and also the most dramatic evidence of this problem appeared in the 1730s in South Carolina. The case of the Gibson family is worth attention partly because it illustrates the fact that South Carolina, with its black majority, was more open than any other Anglo-dominated colony about interracial sex and about a special, higher status for its many mulattoes. Indeed the story of the Gibsons probably could not have taken place in any other British continental colony, for long after the Revolution that state remained uniquely fluid about racial boundaries, even though some signs of the one-drop rule’s presence there appeared long before the 1850s.<sup>59</sup>

The initial incident was triggered by the migration from Virginia to South Carolina of a large, racially mixed family headed by a man named Gideon Gibson. In 1731, the representative assembly and the royal governor of South Carolina felt it necessary to inquire into that family’s racial and social status. Later, in 1768, a white militia commander challenged Gideon Gibson Jr. on the basis of color, despite the impressive economic and social success this son had achieved. The ensuing debate was later recollected by one of South Carolina’s most prominent merchant-planters, whose words made very clear how decision about color were then being made:

By perseverance the black may be blanced and the “stamp of Providence” effectually effaced. Gideon Gibson [Jr.] escaped the penalties of the negro law by producing upon comparison more red and white in his face than could be discovered in the faces of half the descendants of the French [Huguenot] refugees in our House of Assembly.... I challenged them all to the trial. The children of this same Gideon, having passed through another stage of whitewash[,] were of fairer complexion than their prosecutor....

Though it concerned a single incident that was unusually public, this brief account leaves us today with a uniquely early description of a social phenomenon that in the twentieth-century United States came to be known commonly as “passing.”<sup>60</sup>

The social mechanism of passing involved twin conspiracies of social consent and silence. *And* it depended also on the existence of a rigid racial line. It was, indeed, a leap over the barrier drawn by the one-drop rule. Rather than accomplishing the leap in secret, the Gideon Gibson family obtained

political acquiescence from highly placed members of the white community. The concept of passing itself presumed a distinct line of demarcation that could on occasion—but not commonly—be “passed.” In order for the mechanism to operate effectively, individual cases had to be handled discreetly and usually without public comment. In the United States, given the existence of a rigid line, one simply could not safely go around calling apparently white people “black.”

The rule that this Carolina observer laid down has been remarkably persistent in this country. A few scholars have used analysis of genetics as a means of quantifying the number of Americans who are passing today, but such attempts do little to illuminate the social realities of racial intermixture in the United States. Probably millions of Americans with African ancestry do not know they have any. Many others have one or two blood relatives who have discovered, often through genealogical research, that in fact they do. An appreciable number of Americans lead two racial lives, often one at home and the other at work. Despite the theoretical neatness of the one-drop rule, in actual practice it has proved to be very untidy.<sup>61</sup>

Ordinarily the flow of such racial passing has involved switching from black to white, from the category judged inferior to the more favored one. Yet logically the shift could take place in the other direction, from white to black. While uncommon or even rare, such social reversal has in fact taken place. A conspicuous example is the career of bandleader Johnny Otis, which showed that a white person could indeed pass as black. A prominent practitioner and promoter of the new rhythm and blues music of the 1940s, Otis grew up in predominantly black West Berkeley, California, where his Greek father and mother ran a grocery store. When he was still in his late teens, Otis began organizing bands of black musicians for playing in the new style, and he went on to launch numerous black stars such as Big Mama Thornton. Since he had olive skin and wavy short black hair, almost all his fans, both white and black, assumed that this prominent bandleader was himself black. Otis was completely comfortable about himself as a black person and never tried to discourage this presumption.<sup>62</sup>

## **FORMALIZING THE RULE: STATUTES AND COURT DECISIONS**

From such an exceptional performance, we can turn to a line of inquiry about the one-drop rule that has attracted many more historians. In the southern colonies and states, various statutes dealt with the problem of racial definitions. These written laws became more common as time went on, well into the twentieth century. Statutes and even court decisions were necessarily more precise than social custom, and for the most part they settled on some such exact proportion as one-quarter or one-eighth or one-sixteenth. In Virginia, for example, statutory law defined Negroes with the fraction one-quarter throughout the nineteenth century; but early in the twentieth century this proportion was first changed by an anxious legislature to one-sixteenth, and then to any African ancestry at all.

Over the course of several centuries, there were numerous cases bearing on the matter. One of the most famous arose from the 1851 murder of William Johnson, the well-known diarist now often called the Barber of Natchez, who was himself a light-skinned slave-holding free Negro. Two blacks had witnessed the crime. The racial identity of the man who murdered him came into question because in Mississippi (and in many other states, including some in the North and West) blacks were prohibited by statute from testifying against whites in court. After lengthy investigations, the charge against the murderer had to be dropped because prosecutors could not show—despite widespread community assumptions about the man—that he was a light-skinned black man rather than white as he claimed. In this and other cases, such investigations of ancestry were often frustrated by the absence of what today we would call a clear paper trail.<sup>63</sup>



For historical purposes, statutory and case laws were of far less importance than social custom in defining the racial line. On such an emotionally charged matter, evidence concerning the law is an easy path of research compared to the social realm, and hence too many scholars have relied upon it, often exclusively. This tendency has been exacerbated by the fact that legal history has sometimes treated the law as if it arose independently from the logic of the law itself, without reference to the reasons why the relevant law came into existence in the first place. Unsurprisingly, evidence about custom is older than legal opinions and enactments, so that following the chronology of the law is a thoroughly misleading procedure. After all, although statutes and legal cases in the long run probably influenced custom, it was popular custom and opinion that underlay the content of written law about the one-drop rule. One needs to bear in mind that today there is no *legal* explanation as to why in many US cities it is so hard for a well-dressed African American to successfully hail a taxi, and, indeed, that in many instances the cab driver is ignoring the law.<sup>64</sup>

So as to underscore these limitations of the law, we can turn to pronouncements by John B. O’Neill, a Unionist Judge from the upcountry in South Carolina, whose 1848 discourse on “The Negro Law in South Carolina” attacked the problem of definition at a time when South Carolina had not yet fully adopted the one-drop rule and felt under siege by the hordes of slaves within and by growing criticism of slavery without.

Mulatto is the issue of the white and the negro.

When the mulatto ceases, and a party bearing some slight taint of the African blood ranks as white, is a question for the solution of the jury.

Whenever the African taint is so far removed, that upon inspection, a party may be fairly pronounced to be white, and such has been his or her previous reception into society, and enjoyment of the privileges usually enjoyed by white people, the jury may rate and regard the party as white.

No specific rule, as to the quantity of negro blood which will compel a jury to find one to be a mulatto, has ever been adopted. Between one quarter and one eighth seems fairly to be debatable ground. When the blood is reduced to, or below one eighth, the jury ought always to find the party *white*. When the blood is one quarter or more African, the jury must find the party a mulatto.

Despite his lofty tone of instruction from the bench, O’Neill’s assertion that there was “no specific rule, as to the quantity of negro blood” quietly disclosed a surrender by the law to the weight of public opinion.<sup>65</sup>

## **MULATTOPHOBIA: SCIENTIFIC RACISM, SOCIAL DARWINISM, AND HYBRID DEGENERACY**

By 1854, when DeBow republished O’Neill’s views, the term “mulatto” already had a centuries-long history. Today’s dictionaries give the term’s origin as Luso-Hispanic without dates of earliest use, but in all probability it originated during the Portuguese maritime explorations down the Western coast of Africa in the fifteenth century. It meant then what it means today in the English language, into which it was directly appropriated, as also was the word “Negro.” It denoted the offspring of sexual union between two people, one whose ancestry was sub-Saharan African and the other European.

Yet the term never took on such dominant importance as the word “Negro.” Though “mulatto” was employed with considerable frequency in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it became in the twentieth a less commonly used term. Presumably this change was largely caused by

the steadily mounting number of people who did in fact have some black and white ancestry, in greatly various degrees. From the beginning in this country, it did not imply necessarily higher status, though of course mulattoes often received more favorable treatment than those of entirely African descent, most frequently because they were the children of their owners or of some member of their owner's family. Indeed in the eighteenth century the term could be used as a mere modifier of another word that was the operative noun, as when a 1751 advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* referred to a runaway as a "mulatto Negroe." Such phrasing makes strikingly clear the presence of an underlying one-drop orientation in racial description.<sup>66</sup>

The underlying essence of this designation "mulatto" was embedded in the term itself. It derived from the name of the domesticated animal that we call the "mule," the offspring of a male donkey and a female horse. Use of the term is especially revealing for two reasons. One was the essentially animal, as opposed to human, nature of the concept. Apparently there was a felt need to stress the animality of such sexual unions and their offspring. The second is that mules were well known to be at least partially sterile, so that they could not produce fertile offspring. The result was curious to say the least, for during the early years of English and other European colonization in the Americas it was widely assumed in the metropolitan homelands, though not in the colonies themselves, that mulattoes were also infertile. This assumption may now seem bizarre, but during the early years of contact it was a serious assertion, and it continued to be advanced until about the end of the seventeenth century. By that time, at least in England, the ravenous appetite for information from overseas was beginning to undercut this notion that mulattoes could not themselves produce offspring. Thus the supposed infertility of mulattoes quietly disappeared, crushed by the growing weight of reports to the contrary from the overseas social laboratories. Yet this triumph of realistic assessment eventually proved ephemeral, for the notion about mulatto infertility was revived in the United States in the nineteenth century, especially after formal Emancipation. In that long half-century of full-throated attacks on the Negro's fundamental nature, of "scientific racism" and social Darwinism, some commentators decided that mulattoes were indeed at least partially infertile, and evidently this view was a common popular one among many whites especially in the South. Here, surely, was a hopeful dismissal of reality.<sup>67</sup>

This second temporary misstep in bio-ethnography had no lasting effects. No matter how appealing in the South, with its intimate acquaintance with mules, this latter spate of assertions was doomed from the start, and eventually it collapsed in the face of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Yet in retrospect these assertions of infertility were revealing. They combined two assessments, social and scientific, of the relationship between western Europeans and western Africans. Thus they established an intellectual precedent for a posture that still obtains today: that the proper study of "racial" distinctions is both social and scientific.<sup>68</sup>

## WHITHER THE RULE?

The one-drop rule has always depended on racial physiognomic distinctions. In recent years, perhaps the last twenty, it has become fashionable among social scientists and humanists (and even among some natural scientists) to announce with great confidence and even hauteur that the very idea of race is "merely a social construct" and not a scientific one. To be sure, the idea of race is indeed a social construct, as I once tried at length to make clear in a study of the early years of its construction in this country. But the idea of race is also a biological one, and the currently fashionable attempts to deny that fact are founded on what can most generously be called a near total ignorance about the modern science of evolutionary biology.<sup>69</sup> The culprit here is the term "merely," since it so strongly implies that the conclusions of biology are so "mere" and lacking in significance that no attention

need be paid to them. The notion that the concept of race exists in the social world of human beings seems well established and indeed outright obvious from daily observation and experience. On the other hand, it is not clear exactly how large groups of human beings, living in different parts of the globe, came to look visually different from one another. Yet the now-well-established science of evolutionary biology, with the aid of genetic and climatological research, makes clear that a process of riaciation began with the ancient geographical dispersion of the species *Homo sapiens* from the East African rift, first into the Eurasian landmass and later, at times of lower sea levels, to such distant places as the Americas, New Guinea, and Australia. The term “raciation” reflects much more accurately than the word “race” what has happened to produce undeniable regional group differences in human physiognomies. Some enthusiasts would be delighted if there were no such differences, or if they simply went away, but in fact they still exist today and have for many millennia.

Raciation results from geographical isolation over a very long period of time. Given the nature of human beings, it is highly doubtful that appreciable riaciation can take place solely because of social isolation within even a large collection of human beings living in any sort of touch with each other. Raciation comprehends, in biological terms, a process rather than a result. Races exist among many animals. The bird we call the “robin” looks rather different on the West Coast of the United States than it does east of the Rocky Mountains. So do squirrels, shrimp, and oysters. Raciation is in fact a spectrum of way-stations on the road to speciation, that is, on the way to development of a new species. The twin factors of extended time and geographic isolation cause populations of living beings to become different genetically from one another. These factors are hard to comprehend in *historical* terms, for they need to be considered within dimensions of time that are nearly geological. In short, the process of riaciation turning into speciation requires more time and isolation than the species *Homo sapiens* has itself been in existence.<sup>70</sup>

Human beings constitute a single species. We have perhaps moved away from the biblical pronouncement that God “hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth”<sup>71</sup> to genetics, to the discovery that all human beings have such nearly identical patterns of DNA that we all are genetically closer to one another than even all chimpanzees are to each other, let alone to us. The reason for this remarkable fact is that chimpanzees—our closest genetic relatives—evolved long before we did and thus have had more time and isolation (owing largely to their lesser long-range mobility as well as to their technological limitations) in which to undergo the process of riaciation.

Today, *Homo sapiens* is undergoing a process of rapid *deraciation*. It seems unlikely that even atomic or biological warfare can stop this development. Owing to the powerful cultural attributes of our species, we have lost (probably forever) our drift toward racial differentiation.

The one-drop racial rule in the United States will continue, but it will gradually, over a period of historical rather than paleontological time, lose its force. The basic reasons for this gradual demise are social and cultural. The continuation of interracial mixtures will slowly erode the rule’s foundations. We are already in a period of rapidly rising numbers of publicly recognized interracial marriages, and hence children who are called “interracial” or “multiracial” or “mixed race.” In addition, millions of Americans are esteemed socially “white” while actually having an African ancestor. Often such people do not know that this is the case, but sometimes they do. The census of 2000 was the first to capitulate to these trends by allowing people to specify that they are of more than one race or ethnicity. As of the 2010 census, it is now revealed that, nationally, 2.9 percent of our population *is willing* to so identify themselves for census purposes. When considering this 2.9 percent, it is instructive to look at pronounced state-by-state and regional variations. One continental state stands out with the highest percentage—California (polyglot Hawaii is even higher). The percentage in Mississippi is lower even than in such neighboring states as Louisiana, Alabama, and Arkansas—below one percent. It is not that there are fewer people with mixed ancestry in the Deep

South than in California. It is that the racial regime in California admits of the possibility of being mixed. In Mississippi and other southern states, people still see race as an either/or proposition.<sup>72</sup>

The socially constructed dimensions of “race” received a thorough airing a few years ago in the public and scholarly media. A well-known cluster of minor historical events that occurred some two centuries ago suddenly popped up once again to draw the nation’s attention to race and racial definitions. In the years around 1800 a Virginia slave named Sally Hemings had five or six children, and her owner, a prominent slave owner named Thomas Jefferson, was publicly accused of being the father. In 1998 new DNA evidence was announced in the press that tended to confirm the probability of the old, scandalous allegation, which many of his biographers had hoped and stated was groundless. Numerous individuals, and organizations, were outraged. One of these organizations of Jefferson-defenders countered with vociferous public fanfare that this DNA evidence really pointed to Thomas Jefferson’s brother, Randolph, rather than to the President. This Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society announced as one of its stated purposes, “To stand always in opposition to those who would seek to undermine the integrity of the name of Thomas Jefferson.” Thus the author of the Declaration of Independence belatedly became the only President of the United States ever to have his high reputation protected by an organization dedicated to defending his genealogy.<sup>73</sup>

To summarize recent developments in this story, the present-day descendants of Sally Hemings have united to claim the right of burial in the old Jefferson family graveyard. Whites who can successfully demonstrate their descent only from Jefferson are eligible to join the Monticello Association, which administers the plot. That organization in 2003 voted 74–6 to ban from full membership anyone also claiming descent from Sally Hemings.

Sally Hemings herself was very light-skinned and was so described by visitors to Monticello. But because her mother was a slave, she was legally a slave and so were her children. Eventually, in various ways, these children became free. Yet shortly before he died, Thomas Jefferson still maintained his “aversion,” as he wrote privately, “to the mixture of colour” in America. After his death, Sally remained legally a slave, though she was quietly accorded freedom on an informal basis.<sup>74</sup>



Some of Sally Hemings’s descendants became socially white, others socially black. Repeatedly through the ensuing generations, for nearly two hundred years, all of them have had to cope with the social labyrinth of this nation’s deceptively straightforward one-drop racial rule. And so has this country for an even longer period. Announcements about the demise of the rule are premature indeed, for the rule still serves the convictions of many Americans. For a diminishing number of whites it serves to color the ancestry of a pariah people with the indelible taint of servile blackness. And ironically, the rule serves the convictions of many African Americans that they all should retain collectively their vital common interest in their historical and present resistance to racial prejudice and discrimination.

The staying power of the one-drop rule has long been widely rooted in American culture, with thousands of those roots still spreading in daily social exchanges throughout the land. These exchanges include the often-casual conversations of both blacks and whites, as well as the socialization of children in the kind of conversations that may begin with a six-year-old’s question: “Mamma, was that man at the counter a black man?” As early as the seventeenth century, statutory law both reflected and helped reinforce development of customary perceptions, and by the nineteenth century the pronouncements of judges performed the same functions. Both kinds of law almost always reflected the interests of slaveholders, and their personal and class interests placed a premium on stopping any leakage of blacks from the color-based system of racial slavery in which

most blacks (but not all) were slaves and whites were not. From the beginning to the present, the self-interest of whites lay in distancing themselves from the pariah caste. Support for this distancing from free blacks was a later development, though since the end of slavery it has been a powerful buttress of the one-drop rule.

The bifurcating tradition first took root among English-speaking settlers who found themselves in climates that were different from home but not extreme, on well-watered, wooded and meadowed grounds of seemingly unlimited expanse. Though populated by Indians with whom there was much diplomacy and warfare, settlers from the British isles and Germany, along with Africans, came rapidly to outnumber the Indians along the Atlantic coastline. As they made themselves at home in this new-found land, these colonists took control of their own government by establishing representative assemblies and more localized institutions. These assemblies, which wrote the slave codes and helped codify racial distinctions, were unique among the European metropolitan powers which established empires in the New World, and eventually they became the effective levers of revolution against control from London. Creation of the one-drop rule was an almost natural process among those who benefited in this new Anglo-American homeland.



## EDITOR'S REFLECTION

*Winthrop Jordan has taken us on a thoughtful tour of the circumstances and cultural impulses that gave rise to America's peculiar one-drop rule for drawing the line between black and white. He has made, it seems to me, a convincing case for a very early, widespread assumption that one known African ancestor made a person black. There are, however, a few relevant issues with which he has not contended in his essay, mainly having to do with the fate of the one-drop rule in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but also with respect to the present day. I hope I may beg the reader's forbearance while I take up some of them.*<sup>75</sup>

*I am convinced Jordan is correct in asserting that the ground began to be laid for the one-drop rule in the seventeenth century; that it was fairly well established in the British continental colonies (perhaps excluding South Carolina) by the latter eighteenth century; and that, socially speaking, in the colonial period a fairly hard line was struck then between black and white, at least in those parts of the continent where English culture predominated. But as his own work in "American Chiaroscuro" and White over Black showed, and as the Hemings and Gibson family stories also reveal, there was always some leakage in that system. In every generation, there were some people, who were known to have some African ancestry, yet who functioned on the white side of the racial line, and the obverse may have been true as well.*

*Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly has traced carefully the biography of P.B.S. Pinchback, a Reconstruction-era Republican politician. Pinchback probably had some African ancestry and a lot of European ancestry. There were surely slaves in his family's past, yet he lived a more complicated racial existence. He entered the Civil War as a white sergeant and emerged as a black captain. He went on to become the black lieutenant governor and then governor of Louisiana, and he was elected to both the US Congress and the Senate, although he was not seated because he was black. Pinchback had brothers who saw an advantage in being white, and so they lived as white men. P.B.S. Pinchback saw advantage in being black, and so he lived on the black side of the line, and became one of the most influential black leaders of his generation.*<sup>76</sup>

*Jordan points out, rightly, that formal legal codifications of the one-drop rule became common in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, when racial slavery came under abolitionist attack and southern whites sought to defend their peculiar institution. His essay is concerned mainly, however, not with formal legal structures, but with the development of social and psychological commitments to a particular racial regime that occurred considerably before the laws formally codified those commitments. After the Civil War, as one of the scholars Jordan cites, Joel Williamson, pointed out, whether or not the one-drop rule would apply was again up for grabs for perhaps a generation. But then, from the 1890s through the 1920s, as Jim Crow segregation came to be the rule across the South, state after state drew up laws that carefully delineated who would be white and who black according to a severe interpretation of the one-drop rule.<sup>77</sup>*

*Finally, what of the fate of the one-drop rule in our own time? There is no question that the vast majority of Americans see anyone who has any known black ancestry as black. But it also cannot be denied that, over the past two decades, a different consciousness has emerged alongside the one-drop definition of blackness and whiteness. The multiracial movement; the half-century-long, gradual inclusion of people of color in American public life and imagination; the rapid rise in interracial dating, marriage, and child-bearing—all these developments have moved us in the direction of dismantling the one-drop racial rule.<sup>78</sup> Sociologist Mary E. Campbell studied the 1995 Current Population Survey and concluded, “The assumption that black identity is a straightforward, unambiguous construct is clearly out of date; the ‘rule’ that was once seen as a rigid boundary defining black identities has become increasingly flexible and fluid.”<sup>79</sup>*

*So when did the one-drop rule arise? It became entrenched all across the South in the 1910s and 1920s. It first appeared in legal codes in the 1800s. But, as Winthrop Jordan has pointed out so brilliantly in this essay, the psychological and social understandings that lay beneath it were formed in the first several generations of encounter between Africans and Europeans in colonial British North America. In our own day, it might just be that the one-drop rule is beginning to fade away.*

## NOTES

Note: The bulk of the notes that follow were indicated by Professor Jordan either on his manuscripts or in his bibliographical files. Additions to the notes made by the editor are prefaced by “Ed.,” and appear in separate paragraphs.

<sup>1</sup> A preliminary draft of this article was delivered to a workshop on ethnic studies at Brown University in April 2004. Professor Jordan was very grateful indeed to James Campbell at Brown and Matthew Guterl of Indiana University, Bloomington, for their encouragement and great tolerance; to Hunter Upchurch for his expert help with the library, astute commentary, and vital personal assistance; and to evolutionary biologist Andrew Douglas for reading earlier drafts and offering salutary advice.

<sup>2</sup> The editor owes special thanks to the late Cora Jordan, who assigned him this editing task, and to Susan Ditto, David Libby, Patrick Miller, and G. Reginald Daniel who read earlier drafts, made many salutary suggestions, and encouraged him along the way to completion.

<sup>3</sup> In “American Chiaroscuro,” Winthrop D. Jordan provided the most detailed early examination of the topic of multiracial studies. However, other studies were provided by comparative race scholars in the U.S. and Brazil. In the United States, these included Reuter, *The Mulatto in the United States*; Reuter, *Race Mixture*; Frazier, “Some Aspects of Race Relations”; Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil*; Berry, *Almost White*; and Harris, *Patterns of Race*. In Brazil, they encompassed the works of Freyre, *Masters and the Slaves*; Freyre, *The Mansions and the Shanties*; Nogueira, “Mark and Origin.”

<sup>4</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black*.

<sup>5</sup> Early, “Top Ten: Influential Books,” 72–74.

<sup>6</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *The White Man’s Burden*. Jordan’s textbooks include: with Goode, *From Africa to the United States*; with Greenblatt and Bowes, *The Americans: The History of a People*; with Litwack et al., *The United States*; with May, *The American People: A History*. Edited volumes include: Samuel Stanhope Smith, *An Essay on the Causes; The Negro Versus Equality; Slavery and the American South*; with Skemp, *Race and Family*. See also Winthrop D. Jordan, “Hemings and Jefferson: Redux.”

<sup>7</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence*.

<sup>8</sup> For the writing of some of those graduate students, see Libby, Spickard, and Ditto, eds., *Affect and Power*.

<sup>9</sup> All three versions and Professor Jordan’s notes will be deposited in the Winthrop D. Jordan Papers at the University of Mississippi J. D. Williams Library, Department of Archives and Special Collections. [http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/general\\_library/archives/finding\\_aids/MUM01755.html](http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/general_library/archives/finding_aids/MUM01755.html).

<sup>10</sup> Ed.: At the suggestion of the journal’s editor, I have created subtitles for the sections of Professor Jordan’s manuscript (he had made section separations, but had not titled them). Many of Professor Jordan’s other writings included section titles.

<sup>11</sup> Ed.: The emergence of a large cohort of international basketball players in the NBA has complicated this racialized dichotomy a little bit. It is true that Tony Parker, Boris Diaw, and Serge Ibaka are viewed as black by many spectators, but they are also viewed as French (in Parker and Diaw’s case) and Spanish (in Ibaka’s). It is perhaps curious that such Caribbean-born players as Patrick Ewing and Tim Duncan have been viewed not as foreigners from Jamaica and St. Croix but as simply black Americans.

<sup>12</sup> The most influential assertions about the history of the rule have been by Williamson, *New People*. Two substantial books have been written more directly about the one-drop rule. One, a sociological study, is somewhat sketchy and derivative about the rule’s historical origins: F. James Davis, *Who Is Black?*. The other, more recent one, is by far the most ambitious attempt to deal with the topic: Frank W. Sweet, *Legal History*. It deals with the entire matter of two- and three-caste systems, discusses modern genetics, and offers comparisons with Latin American and Caribbean cultures. Except for its treatment of the law, it relies heavily on secondary sources, and it occasionally distorts the views of sources not compatible with its argument. Its definition of the rule is narrower than the one used in this discussion, and its legal focus slights the role of irrational custom and misdates the earliest appearances of the rule. An older study, Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black*, failed to deal with the rule. Jordan’s “American Chiaroscuro” came a bit closer.

Ed: Quite a number of good biographical studies explore individuals’ or families’ movement around the color line. Among them are Ball, *Slaves in the Family*; Haizlip, *The Sweeter the Juice*; Henry, *Pearl’s Secret*; Horne, *The Color of Fascism*; Leslie, *Woman of Color*; Miles, *Ties That Bind*; O’Toole, *Passing for White*; Saunt, *Black, White, and Indian*; Sharfstein, *The Invisible Line*; Williams, *Life on the Color Line*; Woods, *Marginality and Identity*. They provide often fascinating information and observations but do not attempt systematic historical analysis.

Ed: Degler’s fine *Neither Black Nor White*, focused on the “mulatto escape hatch” in Brazil, but in doing so helped illuminate, from a different starting point, the one-drop rule as he compared that colony cum country with the United States. More recently, well-intended hostility to the rule has resulted in an assertion that over the last half century it “has disappeared in the face of more just attitudes and practices,” a claim that is incautiously optative and greatly exaggerated at best: Reis, “Impossible Hermaphrodites.” Degler’s view has been updated by Daniel in *Race and Multiraciality*. Daniel also provides a more nuanced rendering of the past few decades in *Race and Multiraciality* and in his excellent study of the late-twentieth-century multiracial movement in the United States, *More Than Black?*

Ed: In recent years the genetics/disease controversy about racial distinctions has been in the news and the subject of academic symposia; for example, see the brief and somewhat mistitled summary by Nicholas Wade, “Articles Highlight Different Views on Genetic Basis of Race,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 27, 2004, A13. Some anthropologists and sociologists have gussied up the popular term by calling it an instance of “hypodescent.” Anthropologist Marvin Harris (1964) coined the term “hypodescent” shortly after Winthrop Jordan published “American Chiaroscuro.” Harris wrote in *Patterns of Race in the Americas*, 56: “In the United States, the mechanism employed is the rule of hypo-descent. This descent rule requires Americans to believe that anyone who is known to have had a Negro ancestor is a Negro. We admit nothing in between.... ‘Hypo-descent’ means affiliation with the subordinate rather than the superordinate group in order to avoid the ambiguity of intermediate identity.” The term has usually been interpreted as synonymous with the one-drop rule. However, some scholars have pointed out that the ancestral quantum defining legal blackness has varied both historically and geographically. At least by law, hypodescent has encompassed less restrictive definitions than the “one known African forebear”

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required by the one-drop rule; various laws specified fractions of ancestry such as one-fourth, one-eighth, one-sixteenth, and so on. Sometimes hypodescent has been applied to persons of color whose non-White ancestry did not include Africans. The term hypodescent became generally accepted as a result of the wide readership accorded to Daniel, "Passers and Pluralists," and Nakashima, "An Invisible Monster," both of which appeared in the canonical book *Racially Mixed People in America* edited by Maria P.P. Root. The source of Daniel's usage was Marvin Harris. Nakashima borrowed the term from Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation Theory*, which also adopted the term from Harris. Since the 1990s, the concept of hypodescent has become a normative part of Mixed Race Studies.

*Ed.*: More general treatments of the biology and sociology of race include Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*; Graves, *The Emperor's New Clothes*; Marks, *Human Biodiversity* and *What it Means to Be 98% Chimpanzee*. The race and DNA controversy is treated in Koenig, Lee, and Richardson, eds., *Revisiting Race in a Genomic Age*; Roberts, *Fatal Invention*; Wailoo, Nelson, and Lee, eds., *Genetics and the Unsettled Past*.

*Ed.*: Historical treatments of racial mixing in the United States include Hodes, ed., *Sex, Love, Race*; Lubin, *Romance and Rights*; Mumford, *Interzones*; Nash, "The Hidden History"; Robinson, *Dangerous Liaisons*; Romano, *Race Mixing*; Spickard, *Mixed Blood*; Spickard and Daniel, eds., *Racial Thinking*.

<sup>13</sup> In 1980 the term was used repeatedly without any hint of its being a neologism in Williamson, *New People*, 62, 73, 74. In 2012, the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, which calls itself "the definitive record of the English language," offers this definition: "US, now chiefly historical. Designating an ideology in which a person is regarded as black if he or she has even the smallest degree of black African ancestry." The OED cites several uses of the term, the earliest in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1924. [The OED reference in the latter sentence was updated by the editor.]

<sup>14</sup> *Ed.*: Hunter, *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone*; Herring, Keith, and Horton, eds., *Skin/Deep*.

<sup>15</sup> Douglass in *The North Star*, Sept. 15, 1848, 2.

*Ed.*: Examples of African American writers reinforcing the dominance of the one-drop rule are many, and include: Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*; Jon Michael Spencer, *The New Colored People*; Rainier Spencer, *Challenging Multiracial Identity*; Rainier Spencer, *Reproducing Race*; Rainier Spencer, *Spurious Issues*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ed.*: It is worth noting that the one-drop rule has been employed by people of part-Native American and part-white ancestry to try to drive part-Indian, part-black people out of tribes such as the Cherokee. For an introduction to the complex racializations of black-Indian relationships, see Brooks, ed., *Confounding the Color Line*; Miles and Holland, eds., *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds* Sturm, *Becoming Indian*; Sturm, *Blood Politics*.

*Ed.*: For examination of the ways racial identities have worked for Latinos, see Cobas, Duany, and Feagin, eds., *How the United States Racializes Latinos*; Gómez, *Manifest Destinies*; Menchaca, *Recovering History, Constructing Race*; Rodríguez, *Changing Race*.

<sup>17</sup> In addition, since this paper deals with the cultural dimensions of a social rule that was deeply rooted in custom, there is no reason to expect the existence of precisely datable developments.

<sup>18</sup> Miss America Organization, copyright 2013, accessed February 16, 2013, <http://www.missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/1980/1984.aspx>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ed.*: Bacon, *But One Race*; for similar figures, see Basson, *White Enough to Be American?*

<sup>20</sup> On Tiger Woods, see Gary Younge, "Tiger Woods: Black, White, and Other," *The Guardian (UK)* (May 28, 2010), accessed by *Ed.* March 11, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2010/may/29/tiger-woods-racial-politics>.

*Ed.*: see also Weisman, "The Tiger and His Stripes." On Halle Berry, see Sonia Poulton, "I Feel Proud to Call My Daughter Mixed-Race—So Should Halle Berry," *Daily Mail (London)* (February 10, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*; Lewis and Onuf, eds., *Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson*.

*Ed.*: see also Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*; Walker, *Mongrel Nation*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ed.*: Berry, *Almost White*; Blu, *The Lumbee Problem*; Daniel, "Passers and Pluralists"; Hashaw, *Children of Perdition*; Kennedy, *The Melungeons*; Lowery, *Lumbee Indians*; Perdue, "Mixed Blood" Indians.

<sup>23</sup> *Ed.*: On race and beauty culture, some places to start are Banks, *Hair Matters*; Glenn, ed., *Shades of Difference*; Herring, Keith, and Horton, eds., *Skin/Deep*; Hunter, *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone*; King-O'Riain, *Pure Beauty*; Rondilla and Spickard, *Is Lighter Better?*; Rooks, *Hair Raising*. An older study, still worth reading, is Warner, Junker, and Adams, *Color and Human Nature*.

<sup>24</sup> Linke, *Blood and Nation*; Meyer, *Thicker Than Water*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ed.*: Preminent among these is Pascoe's *What Comes Naturally*. This is a very fine study indeed, but like many legal histories it makes the fundamental error of assuming that the law determines how people live their lives in society, not the other way around. For other studies primarily about the law, see Haney López, *White by Law*; Moran, *Interracial Intimacy*; Novkov, *Racial Union*. Randall Kennedy makes a more successful attempt at linking law with lives in *Interracial Intimacies*.

<sup>26</sup> Wood, *Black Majority*.

<sup>27</sup> That boundary-line originally had nothing to do with slavery, since slavery existed in all thirteen colonies. It was named after two surveyors who were employed to assist in the settlement of a boundary dispute between the two proprietary colonies of Maryland and Pennsylvania.

<sup>28</sup> These proportions are shown in a map of US counties as of 1790 in Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black*, 615. An appropriate isothermic line is mapped in Conkin, "Hot, Humid, and Sad," 5.

*Ed.*: See also Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*.

<sup>29</sup> Williamson, *New People*, 62–63, 73–75.

<sup>30</sup> Sweet, *Legal History*, 299–346.

<sup>31</sup> Moreau de Saint-Méry, *American Journey*, 301–02.

<sup>32</sup> *Ed.*: Bolster, *Black Jacks*; Gellman, *Emancipating New York*; Litwack, *North of Slavery*; McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York*; Nash, *Forging Freedom*; Silversmit, *The First Emancipation*.

<sup>33</sup> The best description of black festivals is White, "It Was a Proud Day," 13–50.



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<sup>34</sup> Extensive information on this topic can be found in Barthelemy, "Light, Bright, Damn Near White," 252–75; Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 152–63, 201–09; Brattain, "Miscegenation and Competing Definitions of Race in Twentieth-Century Louisiana," 621–58; Dominguez, *White by Definition*; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*. During the Civil War local authorities in Mobile wanted to arm their free people of color but confederate officials balked; Sellers, *Slavery in Alabama*.

<sup>35</sup> The large corpus on this subject includes Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came*; Menchaca, *Recovering History, Constructing Race*; Meyer, "American Indian Blood," 231–49, which article is broader than its title suggests; Mitchell, *Coyote Nation*; Nieto-Phillips, *The Language of Blood*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ed.*: For the workings of the one-drop rule between Indians and blacks, see Sturm, *Blood Politics and Becoming Indian*. For the complicated racial placements of Hispanics in the United States, see Cobas, Duany, and Feagin, *How the United States Racializes Latinos*, especially essays by Rumbaut (15–36), Rodríguez (37–53), Purcell (54–67), and Gómez (87–100); Nieto-Phillips, *Language of Blood*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ed.*: Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears*.

<sup>38</sup> Mörner, *Race Mixture*. Mörner has a similar but not identical listing for Peru, 58–59.

*Ed.*: See also Katzew, *Casta Painting*.

<sup>39</sup> For *mustee*, see Jordan, "American Chiaroscuro," 185–86.

<sup>40</sup> "Resumen de las nomenclaturas en las diversas mezclas de las razas," 1585, in *Notas del Concilio III, Provincial Mexicano celebrado el año 1585. Confirmado por el Pap Sixto V, y mandado observar por el Rey de España* (edition 1, Galvan Rivera, 1585), II, 334; III, 325, 340. Mörner, *Race Mixture*, 44–45, chapter 5, makes clear that the superiority of Indians to Negroes was not a simple matter; he also deals with the eventual collapse of racial name intricacies, 68–70.

<sup>41</sup> *Ed.*: This is true despite some pretensions to pure whiteness on the part of very small cohorts of upper-class people in such Latin American countries as Brazil, Mexico, and El Salvador. With their very small numbers, such allegedly pure white strata look more like the British elite in India and parts of Africa than they do like the European-descended majority in North America. See King-O'Riain, et al., eds., *Global Mixed Race*; Spickard, ed., *Race and Nation*.

<sup>42</sup> For purposes of this essay, I have lumped together the rather different experiences of Brazil and the Spanish colonies since they were culturally more like each other than like the British colonies. For a work that does the same but adds a brief discussion of Brazilian distinctiveness and the somewhat more fluid nature of Brazilian racial categories, see Mörner, *Race Mixture*, 70–73. On Spanish America, see Swarthout, *Assimilating the Primitive*; Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture*. On Brazil, see also Daniel, *Race and Multiraciality*; Degler, *Neither Black nor White*; Telles, *Race in Another America*; and three essays in Hamilton, et al., eds., *Beyond Racism*; George M. Fredrickson, "Race and Racism in Historical Perspective," 1–26; Guimarães, "The Misadventures of Nonracialism in Brazil," 157–86; and Nascimento, "It's in the Blood," 509–52.

<sup>43</sup> Eltis, "Gender and Slavery," 85–113, particularly 95–98.

<sup>44</sup> A useful summary of such populations is to be found in McEvedy and Jones, eds., *Atlas of World Population History*, 43, 49, 65, 293.

<sup>45</sup> Eltis, *Rise of African Slavery*, 9, table 1–1; this book as a whole is useful on trans-Atlantic migration generally.

<sup>46</sup> Don Jordan and Walsh, *White Cargo*; Menard, *Migrants, Servants, and Slaves*; Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*.

<sup>47</sup> Spruill, *Women's Life and Work*, 9. Letter quotation from H.R. McIlwaine, "The Maids Who Came to Virginia in 1620 and 1621 for Husbands," *The Reviewer I* (April 1, 1921), 109–110.

<sup>48</sup> Eltis, et al., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*, CD-ROM. <http://www.cambridge.org/us/features/0521629101/default.htm>. See also <http://www.slavevoyages.org>.

<sup>49</sup> Among many pertinent studies of the British settlements, two stand out: Games, *Migration and Origins*, focuses on the second quarter of the seventeenth century; Bailyn with the assistance of DeWolfe, *Voyagers to the West*, covers some sixteen years in the latter eighteenth. See also Thompson, "Seventeenth-Century English and Colonial," which confirms the much older but still useful Moller, "Sex Composition." A fine discussion of the complex nature of historical demographic data is Eltis, "Free and Coerced Transatlantic," which despite its title deals with African slaves but not coerced Europeans.

<sup>50</sup> "Somatic norm" was advanced by Hoetink in *The Two Variants*, as a basis for serious discussion by the original author. Sadly, it has been seized upon by others as a substitute for thinking, and has on occasion been nonsensically bowdlerized into "psychosomatic norm image," 161–90.

<sup>51</sup> See Winthrop D. Jordan, "American Chiaroscuro"; Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*.

<sup>52</sup> This cultural revolution is dealt with in my as-yet-unpublished essay "Time, Sex, Money, and Technology: Cultural Aspects of Atlantic Europe in the Sixteenth Century, and the Question Why English Conceptions of Race and Slavery became the Most Rigid in the Americas."

<sup>53</sup> The most authoritative study is Sicroff, *Los Estatutos de Limpieza de Sangre*. Convincing evidence about these Iberian anti-black traditions is in James H. Sweet, "The Iberian Roots," including a translated quotation from the great fifteenth-century Arab historian, Ibn Khaldun: "The Negro nations are, as a rule, submissive to slavery, because (Negroes) have little that is (essentially) human and possess attributes that are quite similar to dumb animals," 147; the quotation is from Ibn Khaldun's masterwork, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, ed. and abr. by N.J. Dawood, trans. Franz Rosenthal [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967]: 117).

Obviously these assertions homogenize the Iberian Peninsula, not merely the differences between Spain and Portugal but the differences among the culturally distinctive parts of Spain. The latter kingdom was, after all, a newly united monarchy (though the same might be said of England). At this point this brief essay merely throws open a door to an adequate approach to differences between Anglo and Latin America. I hope that someone will pursue this most interesting avenue of "comparative history," though doing so adequately will result in a book rather than an article.

<sup>54</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, "Unthinking Decision" in *White over Black*, 3–43.

<sup>55</sup> See a New Englander's comment in Howe, ed., "Journal of Josiah Quincy, Junior, 1773," 463. I have used the word *miscegenation* reluctantly, since its invention (for the title of a political tract) was not until 1864.

<sup>56</sup> [Long], *The History of Jamaica*, 2:260–61; Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial*, 2:18.

*Ed.*: Perhaps the Jamaican partial embrace of a multiplicity of racial categories may be attributed in part to the century and a half that Jamaica spent under Spanish rule before Admiral William Penn invaded the island in 1655.

<sup>57</sup> Handler and Sio, "Barbados," 250; Lloyd, "Letter II, Barbados, 11<sup>th</sup> Month, 16<sup>th</sup>, 1836," 17. See also Beckles, "Black Female Slaves," 111–25; Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, particularly 67; Greene and Cohen, eds., *Neither Slave Nor Free*, 214–15, 230–31, 247–51, 338; Handler, *The Unappropriated People: Freedmen in the Slave Society of Barbados* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974): particularly 18–19; Hoetink, *Slavery and Race Relations*; and the important data and emphasis in Beckles, *White Servitude and Black Slavery*. Existence of the one-drop rule in the 1830s raises doubts about the suggestion by an influential scholar about the important role of Barbadian emigrants in development of classification patterns in colonial South Carolina, though it is perfectly possible that the Barbadian one-drop rule did not develop until after direct influence on South Carolina ended. See Williamson, *New People*, 16.

<sup>58</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black*, 78–80, which points out that the phrase "negro woman" was already in use but was not employed by the court in this instance. At that time the word "spurious" meant almost the same thing as "unnatural."

<sup>59</sup> A French observer in the 1790s referred to a South Carolina capitation tax "in regard to which all men or women of colour are esteemed negroes." Rochefoucault-Liancourt, *Travels through the United States*, 1:568. South Carolina's fluidity was not confined just to Charleston or the Lowcountry: see Burton, *In My Father's House*.

<sup>60</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black*, 173. The Gibson matter is discussed in *ibid.*, 171–74, and in somewhat greater detail in Jordan, "American Chiaroscuro," 189–92. After he first wrote publicly about the Gibsons, Jordan received a letter asking for more information (which he did not have). The letter concluded with the unadorned line, "I am a descendant of Gideon Gibson."

<sup>61</sup> For such mathematical genetic analysis, see Frank W. Sweet, "Afro-European Genetic Admixture in the United States," 15–36, "The Heredity of 'Racial Traits,'" 37–54, and the "Rate of Black-to-White 'Passing,'" 71–88 in *Legal History*. In "the Rate," 86, Sweet puts the number of white American who have some trace of African ancestry at 74 million.

*Ed.*: Here Jordan simplifies the matter into binary categories: black in the home and white outside. He is not specifically alluding to the growing number of people around the turn of the millennium who see themselves as multiracial at least part of the time (and perhaps as black at other times). Rather, he is describing an older (perhaps 1940s–1970s) version of passing, where a person might live at home among family as black but enter the workaday world as white.

<sup>62</sup> See "Johnny Otis Biography," Johnny Otis World, <http://www.johnnyotisworld.com/biography/.html>, accessed February 16, 2013.

*Ed.*: The website has a clear photograph of Otis when he was a youngish man, probably in his thirties. I am grateful to Scott McCraw of "American Routes" (Public Radio International) for drawing my attention to Otis's career. Otis married a white woman, and thus had a marriage which in many circles was called mixed. His extraordinary autobiography is Johnny Otis, *Listen to the Lambs* (New York: Norton, 1968).

*Ed.*: See also Lipsitz, *Midnight at the Barrelhouse*. Herb Jeffries, lead singer for Duke Ellington's band and star (as the Bronze Buckaroo) of many black cowboy movies, also seems to have been a white man (of Irish and Sicilian descent) who passed for black in the entertainment world and in his private life.

*Ed.*: There is irony in Winthrop D. Jordan's final racial placement as well. Many are the readers of *White over Black* who have confessed to being disappointed, on meeting Jordan, to find out that he was not black as they had supposed. When he died, he asked that his body be cremated by a local funeral home that had historically catered to a mainly black clientele; and so on his death certificate recorded by the county coroner he is listed as black. On both such occasions, without any intention of his own, this son of New England seafarers passed for black.

<sup>63</sup> Davis and Hogan, *The Barber of Natchez*, Chapter 22, "The Last Days – and Afterward."

<sup>64</sup> Certainly there are exceptions to such historical malpractice. For examples, see Gross, "Litigating Whiteness," 111–88; Gross, *What Blood Won't Tell*; Higginbotham Jr. and Kopytoff, "Racial Purity and Interracial Sex" in *Interracialism*, 81–139, which goes well beyond Virginia.

<sup>65</sup> O'Neill, "NEGROES: Slave Laws of the South," 2:270–71. For somewhat similar opinions in South Carolina in 1826, 1835, and 1843, see Catterall, comp., *Judicial Cases*, 2:335–35, 358–59, 385–86.

<sup>66</sup> Smith and Wojtowicz, eds. *Blacks Who Stole Themselves*, 34. In the mid-eighteenth century, "mulatto" could also be used as a noun to denote the creolized speech of African slaves. In the Delaware Valley, where the first European settlers were Swedish, an ad for a runaway claimed he "speaks Swede and Mulatto well"; Waldstreicher, *Runaway America*, 10.

<sup>67</sup> Much of the secondary literature is vague about the extent of popular folk-belief about infertility. See Fredrickson, *The Black Image*, 181; Mencke, *Mulattoes and Race Mixture*, 38, 43–44, 50, 56, 59, 65, 85, 101, 103–04, 125.

<sup>68</sup> Anita Hamilton, "A Family Divided," 64–69.

<sup>69</sup> *Ed.*: An exception is a fine work by the historian of science Farber, *Mixing Races*.

<sup>70</sup> "Raciation" is by way of extension from the far more common "speciation." Natural scientists, increasingly aware of social tensions about "race" with human beings, have been desperately creative in dodging that term in favor of others such as "morphs," "tribes," "lineages," "varieties," and "subspecies." Other writers have contented themselves with "kinds" and "sorts." I have used the fine text, Futuyma, *Evolutionary Biology*, especially chapters 4 and 8. For unusually rapid raciation and speciation, see Barlow, *The Cichlid Fishes*. See also the many semi-popular, thoughtful works by Stephen Jay Gould.

<sup>71</sup> Acts 17:26 (King James Version).

<sup>72</sup> *Ed.*: I have retained the substance of Winthrop D. Jordan's analysis and updated the numbers to the 2010 census. US Census Bureau, *Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin*.

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<sup>73</sup> *Ed.*: They even published a book; for a ton of fun, read Coates, Sr., ed., *The Jefferson-Hemings Myth*; an expanded edition, Turner, ed., *The Jefferson-Hemings Controversy*. For a different view, see Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello*; Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*. On the controversy, see Ellis, "Jefferson: Post-DNA," 125–38; Lewis and Onuf, *Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson*; Chris Kahn, "Reunion Bridges Jefferson Family Rift: Snubbed Descendants of Black Slave Hold Their Own Event." NBCNews online: July 13, 2003. [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/3077133/ns/technology\\_and\\_science-science/#.URnDv\\_LheSo](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/3077133/ns/technology_and_science-science/#.URnDv_LheSo).

<sup>74</sup> Thomas Jefferson to William Short, January 18, 1826, in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Ford, 10:362. I have continued to use the term "race" in this discussion, despite the fact that many scholars in various disciplines have called for an end to its use. It is true that it has come to carry erroneous and dangerous connotations of stability through time and of an unchanging and entirely discrete grouping of human beings. Evolutionary biologists still adhere to the concept of "species," but they have creatively adopted such substitutes for "race" as "populations," "morphs," "tribes," "lineages," "varieties," and "sub-species." Whatever synonym is used, each term denotes the way-stations in the process of speciation. We would do better if we were to use the term "raciation" for the evolutionary process by which such gene-pools come into being, for then we could inventively replace the misleading term "miscegenation" with the equally cumbersome but much more accurate "deraciation." See Futuyma, *Evolutionary Biology*; Barlow, *Cichlid Fishes*, chapter 12.

<sup>75</sup> *Ed.*: For the purpose of limiting his discussion to a manageable topic, Professor Jordan specifically noted that he would not be talking about other sorts of mixing and identify formation—white and Asian, black and brown, Indian and black, and so on. They are all relevant to the general question of the one-drop rule, but I agree that they must be set aside in order to pursue the main thread of Professor Jordan's thinking.

<sup>76</sup> *Ed.*: Dineen-Wimberly, "Mixed-Race Leadership; Dineen-Wimberly and Spickard, "It's Not That Simple." Dineen-Wimberly tells the stories of several other people who, in the last third of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, had the open option to live as white or as black and who chose to live as black; among them were novelist Charles W. Chesnut, journalist and diplomat T. Thomas Fortune, politician Richard T. Greener, and educator Adella Hunt Logan.

<sup>77</sup> Williamson, *New People*, 61–109.

<sup>78</sup> Daniel, *More than Black?*

<sup>79</sup> Campbell, "The 'One-Drop Rule,'" 23.

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