

Mulatto: Less than Human

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A column by Julianne Jennings about the history of Mullatos, or mixed-race people.

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Race is not simply about the physical description of human variation. Since its origin in Western science in the eighteenth century, race has been used both to classify and rank human beings according to inferior and superior types. Although race as a concept developed in the West during the age of Enlightenment, prominent Enlightenment thinkers—Carolus Linnaeus, Johann Blumenbach, Lewis Henry Morgan and Samuel George Morton, among others—greatly influenced European ideas about economics, government and science as well as race. Concepts of race eventually spread to many parts of the non-Western world through international commerce, including the slave trade, and later colonial conquest and administration—which have used it as a tool of social division, even among “mixed-race” peoples.

For centuries, a great amount of blood-mixing has occurred, creating “Creole,” “Mestizo,” and other “colored” populations of the New World colonies and possessions of Europe. But what do these labels mean? Haitian anthropologist, Antenor Firmin observes “that human beings have always interbred whenever they came in contact with one another, so that the very notion of races is questionable. Indeed, if not for this fact of the essential unity of humanity, it would be difficult to explain the eugenic crossbreeding that have made the planet sparkle with more human colors than there are nuances in a rainbow”.

According to Paul Broca, who founded the society of Anthropology of Paris in 1859; believed blacks and whites do not belong to the same species. “The union of a Negro and a white woman is very often sterile or infertile, whereas the union of a White man and a Negro is always fecund,” and has to do with the length of the “Ethiopian” penis, which is greater than the length of the Caucasian vagina. So the sex act between a Caucasian man and Ethiopian woman is easy, while the act between an Ethiopian man and Caucasian woman is difficult, painful and most often infertile.” And from this notion, the term “Mulatto” is derived.

The etymology of the term Mulatto comes from the Spanish and Portuguese word *mulatto*, which is itself derived from *mula* (from old Galician-Portuguese, from Latin *m?lus*), meaning mule, the infertile offspring of a horse and a donkey. Countering the racist idea of a racially mixed couple, the term Mulatto was applied to their offspring (a hybrid considered less than human—the dysgenic consequences of race mixing). Mulatto denotes a person with one white parent and one black parent, or more broadly, a person of mixed black and white ancestry. Contemporary usage of the term varies greatly, and the broader sense of the term makes its application rather subjective, as not all people of mixed white and black ancestry choose to self-identify as mulatto. Some reject the term because of its association with slavery and colonial and racial oppression, preferring terms such as "mixed", "biracial", and "African-American" (in the United States). Mulattos may also be an admixture of Native American, South American native and African Americans according to Henings Statutes of Virginia 1705, which reads as follows: “And for clearing all manner of doubts which hereafter may happen to arise upon the construction of this act, or any other act, who shall be accounted a mulatto, Be it enacted and declared, and it is hereby enacted and declared, That the child of an Indian and the child, grand child, or great grand child, of a negro shall be deemed, accounted, held and taken to be a mulatto.

Today those who are mixtures of Indigenous peoples of the Americas and Black Africans are called Zambos while those who are mixtures of African American and Native American are called Black Indians (another subjective term) and sometimes are solely classified or self-identify as African American.

The 1790-1930 Federal Censuses gave this technical definition for persons listed as “Mulatto: A person of mixed race, part black and part white. Someone even came up with different “levels” based on how much black blood a person had (Quadroon for 1/4 black, for example). Generally speaking, a “Mulatto” is someone of medium dark skin, or even “yellow” skin as described in some old records. In the early years of the census there were not enough race codes to cover every possible race; so many people listed as “Mulatto” were of some other origin. So keep in mind, that those listed as “Mulatto” could be mixed Black-White, White-Indian, Black-Indian, or a combination of all three, “Tri-racial”. This doesn’t even account for those who might be dark skinned, but some other origin like Melungeon, “Black-Dutch,” as you can imagine this was a catch-all category on early census records. In 1790, anyone considered “Mulatto” would have been listed on the “Other” columns. In 1800 through 1840, they would have been listed in the “Free Colored” columns. In 1850 and later, they would have been listed with a race code of “M” in the “Color” column. In many cases you will find these same people listed as “White” on some other census records.

It is obvious blacks and whites have been in constant contact with one another based on the numerous racial definitions of the federal census, and fecundity of mulattoes is a well-known fact. Dr. Fluehr-Lobban in her book provides an excellent example of this, “The Dominican population of Hispaniola offers initial proof that among both first generation mulattoes and subsequent generations the unions of mixed-race persons are as fecund as those between

“pure-raced” people.” While the traveling theory may focus on the movement and location of those who travel, the attention here is on the people, whose bodies, territories, beliefs, values and customs have been traveled *through*, first beginning European explorers then conquerors to early Enlightenment philosophers and by those who continue with racist thinking. Of the small amount of human genetic variation, eighty-six percent exists within a local population. There is more variation within a particular race than there is between different races. Race is not biological, but racism is real. These perceived “racial” differences justified colonial control, slavery and the social inferiority of today.

Anyone who adheres to Enlightenment theories is choosing to ignore irrefutable evidence to the contrary. As Englishman John Heywood stated in 1546, well before the Enlightenment, “There are none so blind as those who will not see.”

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