

Genesis of U.S. Colorism and Skin Tone Stratification: Slavery, Freedom, and Mulatto-Black Occupational Inequality in the Late 19th Century

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Abstract

Studies show lighter skinned Black people are advantaged on a number of social indicators—a phenomenon called “colorism.” These studies generally contend preferences for light-skinned and/or Mulatto slaves endured the postbellum period to shape social outcomes into today. Following this idea, other studies examine differences in social outcomes between Mulattos and Blacks in the 19th century, but few empirically connect antebellum life to postbellum Mulatto-Black stratification. With that in mind, I examine whether the socio-economic differences between Mulattos and Blacks varied across geographic space in proportion to places’ reliance on slave labor and the characteristics of its free African American population. This allows me to examine whether differences in economic status between Mulattos and Blacks are a result of Mulatto advantage in the form of privileged positions during slavery. My results reveal that Mulattos have higher occupational statuses relative to Blacks in places where slavery was more prominent and where free Mulattos were literate. This suggests the intraracial hierarchy established during slavery was more likely to be replicated in places where slavery was more important, and Mulattos were able to capitalize on freedom by leveraging their literacy into better economic statuses after emancipation. These results support the idea that skin color stratification was initiated at least in part by practices during chattel slavery and offers some plausible mechanisms for its transmission.

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Introduction

Chattel slavery in the United States was a fundamentally racialized institution that previous research shows continued to shape racial inequality even after emancipation (Bertocchi & Dimico, 2012, 2014; Lagerlöf, 2005; O'Connell, 2012; Reece & O'Connell, 2016). But slavery was more than an institution of interracial boundaries, creating and exacerbating racial inequality between Blacks and Whites; it also shaped intraracial boundaries among Black people. It not only determined who and who was not Black but also contributed to skill differences that molded occupational success post-Emancipation (Ruef & Fletcher, 2003).

Additionally, historians and social scientists credit chattel slavery with creating a system of light skin preference through slave owners' fondness for mixed Mulatto slaves (Frazier, 1930; Reuter, 1917; Toplin, 1979). They generally argue that system of light skin preference persisted through the eventual codification and institutionalization of the one-drop rule into the modern system of colorism or skin tone stratification among Black Americans (Keith & Herring, 1991; Washington, 2011). Research shows lighter skinned Black Americans outperform their darker skinned counterparts in income (Goldsmith, Hamilton, & Darity, 2006, 2007), education (Branigan et al., 2013; Monk, 2014), health (Diette, Goldsmith, Hamilton, & Darity, 2015; Monk, 2015); receive shorter prison sentences (Blair, Judd, & Chapleau, 2004; Viglione, Hannon, & DeFina, 2011); and are perceived as more attractive (Reece, 2016). However, although some researchers have examined colorism extending back to the 19th century, even during chattel slavery (Bodenhorn, 1999, 2002, 2006; Bodenhorn & Ruebeck, 2007), we have yet to empirically verify the claim that colorism was initiated by slavery by directly connecting slavery to skin tone stratification post-Emancipation.

Contemporary social scientists use nationally representative surveys with a variety of measures of "skin tone," and occasionally other racialized characteristics such as eye color, hair color, and hair texture, to investigate skin tone stratification. But those types of surveys are a relatively recent development and certainly did not exist in the 19th century. However, the U.S. Census offers researchers a method to investigate colorism during those earlier periods. From 1850 to 1930, the Census did not record "Black" as a single discrete racial category. Instead, Census enumerators were instructed to record whether a Black identified person was also Mulatto, that is Black-White multiracial, but generally, enumerators neglected to delve too deeply into family histories and relied on phenotypic markers and local customs to decide how to code people (Gross, 1998; Hochschild & Powell, 2008; Toplin, 1979). This meant the distinction between "Mulatto" and "Black" often correlated strongly with differences in skin tone, with Mulattos, who were presumed to be multiracial, functioning as a light-skinned group of Black Americans, and "regular" Blacks, presumed to be racially

pure, functioning as a dark-skinned group of Black Americans. Therefore, by analyzing differences in Blacks and Mulattos, researchers can examine intraracial color skin tone stratification among Black people during its early days. Some researchers have already assumed this task. They show when compared with Blacks, Mulattos had greater occupational prestige (Gullickson, 2010; Saperstein & Gullickson, 2013), lower mortality rates (Green & Hamilton, 2013), lower child mortality rates (Frazier, 1933), and greater wealth (Bodenhorn & Ruebeck, 2007; Schwenger, 1990). Drawing on this work, I can use 19th-century stratification between Blacks and Mulattos to examine whether early instances of American colorism were indeed rooted in the social circumstances unique to chattel slavery. This will give us a clearer understanding of the genesis of colorism as a contemporary phenomenon.

Specifically, this study examines whether the economic statuses of Mulattos and Blacks—in effect, lighter skinned Black Americans and darker skinned Black Americans—before the widespread institutionalization of the one-drop rule varied across geographic space in proportion to local reliance on slave labor. This offers a test of the premise that colorism is rooted in the conditions of chattel slavery that privileged Mulattos relative to Blacks. If skin tone stratification is based on intraracial antebellum hierarchies, Mulattos should maintain their advantage relative to Blacks in places that relied heavier on slave labor. The results generally support this idea, showing places with a stronger attachment to slavery produced slightly greater economic stratification between Mulattos and Blacks.

Mulattos—Black Stratification: The Genesis of Skin Tone Stratification

Colorism is a system of practices and ideologies that privileges lighter skinned Black people, with facial features typically associated with Europeans, over their darker skinned counterparts with more African-associated facial features (Feliciano, 2016; Reece, 2016). Research consistently shows the effects of contemporary colorism are far-reaching. As I said earlier, lighter skinned Black Americans earn higher wages (Goldsmith et al., 2006, 2007), obtain more education (Branigan et al., 2013; Monk, 2014), enjoy better health outcomes (Diette et al., 2015; Monk, 2015), receive shorter prison sentences (Blair et al., 2004; Viglione et al., 2011), are perceived as more attractive (Reece, 2016), and outperform their darker skinned counterparts on a number of other social outcomes.

Although scholars have become quite adept at describing the extent of colorism, few manage to effectively describe the mechanisms that facilitate colorism. Goldsmith et al. (2007) and Painter, Holmes, and Bateman (2015) break this trend when they present the “preference for whiteness thesis.” They use a combination of social psychology and anthropology to explain the perpetuation of color stratification. In short, they argue humans cognitively categorize the social world into in-groups and out-groups they use to organize their behavior. Generally, people prefer in-group members over out-group members and offer preferential treatment to the former while shunning

the latter. When these patterns of differential treatment are mapped onto groups with different levels of social power, such as racial groups, they can result in widespread social inequality. People use visual cues to classify others into racial in-groups and out-groups, with certain physical characteristics—primarily skin tone, but also hair, eyes, lips, and noses—identifying a person as White and others as Black, governing how they are treated. However, people do not racially classify others into a strict dichotomy using these visual cues. Instead, people receive social favor in proportion to their position on a sliding scale of visible Blackness. The “more White,” “less Black” a person looks, such as lighter skin, thinner noses, thinner lips, and straighter hair, the more White in-group benefits they receive, lifting their social position above their “Blacker” counterparts. Moreover, when a group—Black people—is forced to acknowledge the supposed superiority of a group higher on the social hierarchy—White people—they may also offer them preferential treatment, explaining why Black people also tend to favor lighter skinned people.

The preference for Whiteness thesis was arguably codified during chattel slavery, particularly the history of miscegenation and slave owner preferences for light-skinned and mixed-race Mulatto slaves (Frazier, 1930; Toplin, 1979). Indeed, a growing number of studies examine the social and economic differences between Mulattos and Blacks in the late-19th century, showing Mulattos enjoyed better outcomes on almost every measure (Bodenhorn & Ruebeck, 2007; Green & Hamilton, 2013; Gullickson, 2010; Saperstein & Gullickson, 2013). Yet, despite anecdotal acknowledgment of color stratification’s origins in antebellum slavery and evidence of Mulatto advantage during the period, few studies attempt to empirically connect antebellum life to 19th century Mulatto–Black stratification as a basis for exploring the genesis of skin tone stratification among African Americans.

Although officially Mulattos and Blacks were defined by their racial heritage with Black people supposedly of “pure” Black heritage and Mulattos of mixed Black and White heritage, practically, the categories primarily measure differences in skin tone and phenotype. It is unclear how often Census enumerators actually inquired about the ancestry of the people they counted as Mulatto, but commonly, they simply relied upon the knowledge of the day and local customs and beliefs, which held that one could determine racial heritage based on appearance and social status (Gross, 1998; Hochschild & Powell, 2008; Toplin, 1979). Prevailing social norms dictated racial heritage was visible and easily discernable to any person who would pay attention. A quote from a North Carolina judge reflects this belief:

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

A witness testimony from an Alabama court further supports this idea, as people thought they could discern specific quantiles of racial mixture from mere appearance:

Susan is of very light complexion, has straight hair, is slightly swarthy, and has rather thick lips and coarse features. From her appearance, I am of the opinion that she has a small amount of African blood in her veins . . . not more than an eighth or a sixteenth. Her mouth and features generally indicate the African blood. (Gross, 1998, p. 104)

Armed with the confidence they had “for a sufficient length of time [devoted their] attention to the subject,” enumerators likely counted numerous lighter skinned African Americans as Mulatto regardless of their racial heritage. This is evident in how light-skinned African Americans have been shown to change from Black to Mulatto or Mulatto to Black based on their occupational mobility patterns (Saperstein & Gullickson, 2013).

But the relative arbitrariness of these Census enumerations does not mean Mulattos did not form a distinct class during this period in U.S. history. Indeed, it was not uncommon for Mulattos to go to great lengths to preserve their distinctiveness, deploying social closure strategies such as marrying other Mulattos and excluding African Americans of darker complexions from their social clubs (Bodenhorn, 2006; Meier & Lewis, 1959). These social closure strategies coupled with preferential treatment from White people translated into distinct differences in life outcomes (Bodenhorn, 2006).

Although the importance of different classifications for Mulattos and Blacks decreased as the Jim Crow “one-drop rule” began to gain traction across the country, legally and socially making millions of Mulattos “Black” (for an in-depth discussion of the institutionalization of the one-drop rule, see Washington, 2011), the skin color stratification that had already been established through phenotypical differences in the two groups persisted. The geographic variation in Black–Mulatto stratification immediately before widespread shifts to the “one-drop rule” allows me to test whether colorism is actually an outgrowth of antebellum Mulatto advantage. I can do this by examining whether the geographic distribution of Mulatto advantage in the antebellum years correlated with the differences in post-Reconstruction Black–Mulatto occupational stratification, specifically whether a history of privileging Mulattos before Emancipation is associated with more intense stratification between the two groups later in history, which would support the idea that patterns of antebellum privilege created colorism.

Mulatto Advantage and the Codification of the Preference for Whiteness Thesis

Status differences in Mulattos and Blacks during the antebellum years were no accident, and evidence suggests the core ideas of the preference for Whiteness thesis began to appear early in the 19th century and fueled Black–Mulatto stratification. Mulattos were bolstered through preferential treatment from White people (Frazier, 1930; Reuter, 1917; Toplin, 1979). Because of their presumed White blood, White people generally perceived Mulattos as smarter, more attractive, more industrious, and less deviant than Blacks (Berlin, 1974; Bodenhorn, 2006; Frazier, 1930; Reuter, 1917; Schweninger, 1989, 1990; Toplin, 1979). In some cases, White people even perceived

Mulattos as more closely allied with White people than their Black counterparts, as evident in a legislative report on a planned slave revolt in the early 1820s:

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

Indeed, some evidence suggests White preference for Mulattos may have also been the result of their perceived utility as a buffer between the White population and a possibly unruly Black population. By this logic, conferring favor on Mulattos may have offered White people a shield from Black ire (Gullickson, 2010).

Enslaved Mulattos received a number of advantages relative to their Black counterparts. Because Whites generally thought Mulattos were sharper, more esthetically pleasing, and more capable of being “civilized”, they often offered them positions as house servants, away from the toils of field work, and afforded them the opportunity to acquire trade skills and other education that they could use outside of the plantation. Moreover, they were given significantly more freedom to move throughout and off the plantation (Frazier, 1930; Toplin, 1979).

Advantages on plantations fed into the advantages Mulattos accrued as free African Americans. Mulattos were twice as likely to be manumitted as Blacks, resulting in vast disparities in the number of free Mulattos and free Blacks and reflecting Mulattos’ preferential status (Bodenhorn, 2011). In 1860, about 41% of free southern African Americans were Mulatto, while only about 10% of enslaved African Americans were Mulatto. In the Deep South, the differences were even starker. In the Deep South, about 76% of free African Americans were Mulatto and only 9% of slaves were Mulatto. In some places, the Mulatto free population so greatly contrasted the Black slave population “free black” and “mulatto” almost became synonymous (Berlin, 1974). Moreover, Mulattos leveraged their racial ancestry into economic favor from White people, which allowed them to capitalize on their freedom (Bodenhorn, 2011; Schweninger, 1989). The manumitted children of slave-slave owner sexual liaisons were often given a financial head start by their White parent upon entering free society or were able to use their White parent’s social networks to gain economic advantages. As a result, Mulattos were disproportionately represented among prosperous freedmen and business owning freedmen (Schweninger, 1989, 1990) and held significantly more wealth than Blacks. In 1860, Mulatto wealth was 50% of White wealth while Black wealth was only 20% of that of Whites (Bodenhorn & Ruebeck, 2007).

The advantages afforded to Mulattos did not end with slavery. They persisted through reconstruction, up until the start of Jim Crow when the Census dropped the category altogether. Through the rest of the 19th century, Mulattos continued to enjoy greater occupational prestige (Gullickson, 2010; Saperstein & Gullickson, 2013), lower mortality rates (Green & Hamilton, 2013), and lower child mortality rates (Frazier, 1933).

The ideas presented by the preference for Whiteness thesis are supported by a complex history of White people ladling preference and advantage onto Mulattos, raising their status relative to Blacks. However, White preference for Mulattos also contributed to boundary formation processes demarcating the difference between Blacks and Mulattos. These boundaries would maintain and strengthen the Mulatto-over-Black social hierarchy throughout the antebellum years, through Emancipation and Reconstruction, and reinforce occupational stratification between the two groups.

Boundary Formation and Boundary Strengthening

The courtesy Mulattos received from Whites during the antebellum years would have translated into boundaries between Blacks and Mulattos built into the structure of the antebellum system. Mulattos' favored positions on plantations would have initiated a boundary formation process, where relatively prestigious plantation occupations would have become increasingly associated with Mulattos, drawing distinctions between them and Blacks, who were generally forced into more strenuous roles. This idea has become mythologized in American culture as ideas about light-skinned Mulatto house slaves are continuously contrasted with those about dark-skinned field slaves. However, as more and more Mulattos gained their freedom and even began to accrue a measure of economic status, both often with the assistance of White people, the boundary between Blacks and Mulattos would have gained another dimension as Mulattos became increasingly associated with freedom and affluence and gained the autonomy to police the boundaries between themselves and Black people without relying completely on preference from White people. In these ways, preference for Whiteness would lead to the construction of antebellum boundaries that highlight and fortify inequality between Blacks and Mulattos.

Because these interactions centered on roles situated in the structure of slavery—field slave versus house slave; free versus slave—the power of the local slave economy may have played a vital role in facilitating the construction of boundaries and Black–Mulatto inequality. Places with more slaves may have developed a stronger connection to the differences between Blacks and Mulattos that characterized the institution while places with fewer slaves may be less attached to the boundary between the two groups. However, although Mulatto–Black boundary formation may have initially grown from slave systems, the destruction of slavery did not result in the deconstruction of those boundaries. Indeed, a series of interrelated processes may have strengthened those boundaries in the same places where slavery once held sway.

Uncertainty is a social state in which economic actors are unsure of the rules governing the new economy after a significant institutional transition, such as the transition from chattel slavery to Emancipation (Ruef, 2014). Uncertainty is characterized by shared difficulty of the actors in an economic system in predicting the outcomes of decisions they make in the new system. The “norms, routines, and governance structures that constrain economic action. . .are. . .in flux” leading actors to “reassemble elements of older traditions and organizational forms in order to confront uncertainty

and find a new basis for social order” (Ruef, 2014, p. 4). This process has been called emulation (Tilly, 1998).

Often, the costs of creating brand new modes of social order exceed the cost of reusing past forms of social organization. Emulation decreases the cost of creating a stable social order in the midst of uncertainty by importing models of social interaction and organizational forms, both equal and unequal, from the past. It recreates old local knowledge and social relations, repurposes old institutions, and imbues new institutions with old norms, a combination of processes that combines to reconstruct past inequalities. These new, emulated forms of interaction appear similar but not identical to the past, but carry similar power relations. Ultimately this would mean the interactions that governed Blacks relative to Mulattos may be imported to the post-Emancipation South, thus maintaining the boundaries created during the antebellum years and perpetuating the system of colorism.

However, I argue the transition from slavery to freedom resulted in more than simple emulation in the case of Blacks and Mulattos. Instead, the boundaries between the two groups may have strengthened. Wimmer (2008) offers a theory of ethnic boundary formation that may be useful for explaining this possibility. He argues actors emphasize ethnic boundaries when they are incentivized to do so. In places where slavery was more prominent, Mulattos may have been incentivized to practice social closure strategies to strengthen the boundary between themselves and their Black counterparts. The decline of slavery to police the boundaries between the two groups may necessitate stronger boundaries so Mulattos could maintain their distance from the maligned Black population. Distancing themselves from Black people may have offered Mulattos a degree of relative safety and economic opportunity. Moreover, Wimmer emphasizes social networks determine where ethnic boundaries are drawn. That is, groups with more connections to power, particularly political elites, in turn, may have more power to draw boundaries between themselves and other groups. In the case of Mulattos, a stronger local history of slavery may have left them with more connections to powerful Whites because of parental ties or other extended kin networks. Free Mulattos were able to leverage ties to Whites for economic gain and the Mulatto children of slave owners were often afforded a significant amount of freedom on plantations (Frazier, 1930; Schweninger, 1989, 1990). These ties may have allowed them to further distance themselves from their Black counterparts in the postbellum period. Finally, Wimmer argues boundary decisions rely on cultural consensus, in this case, meaning local actors essentially needed to agree on the privileged status of Mulattos relative to Blacks. Although the Mulatto category was reified by the U.S. Census, the strength of the hierarchy, and indeed who was and was not Mulatto, was negotiated locally (Gross, 1998; Hochschild & Powell, 2008; Toplin, 1979). A strong history of slavery may have reinforced the Mulatto-over-Black hierarchy as an integral part of the local social structure because of familiarity with the relative privilege of Mulattos on plantations and perhaps even the conflation of “Mulatto” with “free” and “Black” with “slave.” In combination, these processes may have led to a strengthening of Black–Mulatto boundaries that would exacerbate the occupational stratification

between the two groups in the postbellum period in places where there were greater concentrations of slaves.

Method

My data come from the U.S. Census as provided by the Minnesota Population Center's National Historical Geographic Information System and Integrated Public Use Microdata Series. The analysis includes counties from the Census-defined South (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia) where the boundaries remained unchanged from 1860 to 1880. I was forced to exclude Oklahoma because it was not yet a state in 1860 and thus lacks the county-level data I used for my analysis.

Studies at the county level are common in research about slavery and path dependency (see Bertocchi & Dimico, 2012, 2014; Lagerlöf, 2005; O'Connell, 2012; Reece & O'Connell, 2016). It is an optimal unit for analyzing historical path dependency processes, particularly in the case of racial inequality in the South (Lobao & Hooks, 2007). Because the region has been overwhelmingly rural, county governments have historically played a major role in facilitating and constraining civic, social, and economic opportunities. Southerner's most salient and consistent interactions with the state have been with county governments (Petersen & Ward, 2015), and social life, including social movement and counter-movement organizations, has been organized at the county level (Andrews, 2002). Moreover, and perhaps most importantly for this study, the county was the area of operation for Census enumerators, meaning their definitions about who was Mulatto and who was Black should be relatively consistent within each county (Gross, 1998; Hochschild & Powell, 2008; Toplin, 1979).

I chose 1880 as the primary year of analysis because it marks the beginning of the transition to the one-drop rule. By 1880, Reconstruction had ended leading to what Gullickson (2010) calls "the dawn of Jim Crow" and the institutionalization of the one-drop rule was starting to quicken (Washington, 2011). This makes 1880 a prime year to analyze the strength of the color boundaries that ultimately became modern colorism.

Dependent Variable

My dependent variable is Mulatto occupational status relative to Black occupational status in 1880. I measure occupational status using the average Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI) score for Blacks and Mulattos in each county. The Duncan SEI score uses average income and education for occupations in 1950 to develop a score for social prestige. While my study is set in the mid-late 19th century, almost 100 years before 1950, the Duncan SEI score has been shown to reliably depict social prestige across time (Hout & DiPrete, 2006), and similar studies of this time period (i.e., Gullickson, 2010; Saperstein & Gullickson, 2013) use it because of its reliability. Duncan SEI

scores are structured such that higher scores indicate higher occupational status. I used full count Census data from 1880 to construct county-level averages for Blacks and Mulattos. The averages include people from age 17 to 65¹ to only capture those typically in the labor market. I then created a ratio of the scores to give a measure of Mulatto–Black inequality. Here, values above 1 indicate increasing inequality favoring Mulattos, whereas values below 1 indicate increasing inequality favoring Blacks. A value of 1 indicates equal Mulatto–Black occupational status in the county.

Focal Independent Variable

My primary independent variable is the local concentration of slavery, which is represented by the proportion of each county's total population that was enslaved in 1860. This provides a measure of the density of the local slave population.

Control Variables

In addition to my focal independent variables, I also include a variety of other variables to control for other phenomena that may shape Mulatto–Black occupational inequality.

First, I examine two dimensions of free Mulatto populations that may have offered them a head start in accumulating occupational prestige: education and wealth. I use two variables to measure education: literacy and school enrollment. Literacy is a dichotomous variable indicating a Mulatto in the county can read and write, and school enrollment is a dichotomous variable indicating a Mulatto in the county is enrolled in school. I use both literacy and school enrollment because in the antebellum South, they measure different phenomena. The presence of literate Mulattos signals access to literate family members or Whites that could teach others to read, not necessarily a formal education; indeed, formal education was very limited in the South in general at the time (Anderson, 1998; Span, 2009). I use dichotomies of these variables rather than proportions because of how a few literate people could have large ripple effects on the future of a community at this time, either by translating and negotiating contracts or teaching others to read. With schooling, any Mulattos enrolled in school signals a significant level of social privilege considering the infrequency of school enrollment for anyone but the elite (Anderson, 1988; Span, 2009).

I also use two variables to measure wealth: real estate value and personal property value. Real estate value is a dichotomous variable indicating average Mulatto real estate value in the county is above the weighted average of Mulatto real estate in the South, excluding debts. Personal property value is a dichotomous variable indicating average Mulatto personal property value is higher than the weighted average of the value of Mulatto personal property in the South. I elected to use dichotomous variables to indicate above average wealth because average wealth in many counties was very low or zero. Above average wealth indicates the presence of an affluent Mulatto community.

Next, I include the percentage of the local African American population identified as Mulatto. This allows me to account for the possibility that in some counties aggregate Mulatto occupational prestige may be inflated because the county only has a very small number—two or three—of Mulattos, who are all in very elite positions. I also control for Mulatto–Black literacy inequality and schooling inequality in 1880 to ensure differences in Mulatto–Black occupational prestige were not merely reflections of other proximate causes.

Building on Gullickson (2010), I include a variety of historical and proximate measures of White affluence because he found a significant connection between White occupational prestige and Mulatto–Black occupational inequality.

I also include a measure of whether any African Americans in the county reported being denied the right to vote in 1870. Because 1870 was in the thick of Reconstruction; there were fewer restrictions on African Americans voting than there were in the subsequent decades under Jim Crow (Foner, 1987), so a positive report of voting restrictions may be indicative of a county with an especially pernicious brand racism that may dampen the differences between Blacks and Mulattos.

Finally, I include a variety of measures of the type and quality of the local economy to account for the possibility that certain types of economies, those heavy in manufacturing, for instance, may increase occupational inequality by providing a wider variety of hierarchal occupations. In contrast, other economies, such as those heavy in sharecropping, may dampen occupational inequality because the available occupational opportunities are relatively flat.

See Table 1 for a full listing of the variables and definitions.

Model Design

I estimated two series of models. The first series of models tests effect of the proportion of slaves on Mulatto–Black occupational inequality in 1880, net of the following controls: proportion of Mulattos in 1880, Mulatto–Black literacy inequality in 1880, Mulatto–Black schooling inequality in 1880, proportion of free Blacks in 1860, Mulatto literacy in 1860, Mulatto schooling in 1860, Mulatto real estate in 1860, Mulatto personal property in 1860, White occupational status in 1880, White literacy in 1880, White schooling in 1880, White real estate in 1860, White personal property in 1860, whether a Black person reported being denied the right to vote in 1870, manufacturing capital invested in 1880, percentage of farmers sharecropping in 1880, percentage of farm operators own their farms in 1880, and mean farm value in 1880.

The second series of models substitutes Mulatto SEI and Black SEI each as the dependent variables to gain greater insight into the processes driving occupational inequality between the two groups. I used the same modeling strategy as above with one exception. I substituted the Mulatto antebellum freedom variables with variables to examine Black freedom in 1860: Black literacy, Black schooling, Black real estate value, and Black personal property.

Table 1. Variables and Descriptive Statistics for Southern Counties.

	M	SD	Description
Mulatto/Black SEI	1.06	0.23	Ratio of average Mulatto Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI) to average Black SEI
Mulatto SEI	6.78	1.83	Average SEI for Mulattos
Black SEI	6.44	1.32	Average SEI for Blacks
Legacy of slavery	0.31	0.22	Proportion of county population enslaved
Mulatto 1880	0.19	0.16	Proportion of county African American population identified as Mulatto
Mulatto/Black literacy 1880	1.61	1.26	Ratio of the proportion of literate Mulatto adults to literate Black adults
Mulatto/Black schooling 1880	1.37	2.15	Ratio of the proportion of Mulatto children in school to Black children in school
Free African Americans 1860	0.07	0.15	Proportion of African Americans who were not enslaved
Mulatto literacy 1860	0.15	—	Dichotomous variable indicating literate Mulattos in the county
Mulatto schooling 1860	0.01	—	Dichotomous variable indicating Mulatto children in school in the county
Mulatto real estate value 1860	0.03	—	Dichotomous variable indicating the average value of Mulatto real estate in the county is above the Southern Mulatto mean
Mulatto personal property value 1860	0.02	—	Dichotomous variable indicating the average value of Mulatto personal property in the county is above the Southern Mulatto mean
Black literacy 1860	0.16	—	Dichotomous variable indicating literate Blacks in the county
Black schooling 1860	0.005	—	Dichotomous variable indicating Black children in school in the county
Black real estate value 1860	0.01	—	Dichotomous variable indicating the value of Black real estate in the county is above the Black mean
Black personal property value 1860	0.007	—	Dichotomous variable indicating the value of Black personal property in the county is above the Black mean
White SEI	9.30	2.43	Average SEI for Whites
White literacy 1880	0.80	0.12	Proportion of White adults who are literate
White schooling 1880	0.26	0.09	Proportion of White children in school
White real estate value 1860	555.04	1,712.25	Average White real estate value
White personal property value 1860	726.64	1,054.3	Average White personal property value
African American denied vote	0.02	—	Dichotomous variable indicating an African American reported being denied the right to vote
Manufacturing	306,830.88	1,797,854.66	Amount of capital invested in manufacturing
Sharecropping	0.22	0.12	Proportion of farm operators sharecropping
Farm owners	0.68	0.16	Proportion of farm operators who own their farms
Mean farm value	495.01	626.00	Average value of farms in the county

Table 2. Spatially Robust OLS Estimates for Mulatto–Black Occupational Inequality (*n* = 623).

Intercept	0.87*** (0.08)
Legacy of slavery	0.12* (0.05)
Mulatto %	-0.38*** (0.08)
Literacy inequality 1880	0.02* (0.01)
Schooling inequality 1880	0.002 (0.002)
Free African descendants	-0.006 (0.06)
Mulatto literacy 1860	0.05*** (0.01)
Mulatto schooling 1860	0.01 (0.06)
Mulatto real estate 1860	0.03 (0.03)
Mulatto personal property 1860	0.03 (0.05)
White SEI	0.01*** (0.003)
White literacy 1880	0.04 (0.07)
White schooling 1880	0.09 (0.08)
White real estate 1860	0.000004 (0.000003)
White personal property 1860	-0.000001 (0.000005)
African descendants denied vote	0.01 (0.04)
Manufacturing	-0.00000 (0.00000)
Sharecroppers	0.001 (0.07)
Farm owners	-0.02 (0.06)
Mean farm value	0.00001 (0.00001)
<i>r</i> ²	.23

Note. OLS = ordinary least squares.
 †*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .0001.

I estimated both series of models using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, but a test for spatial autocorrelation using a Moran’s I test confirmed that my residuals were spatially correlated. To account for this, I present spatially robust standard errors in my results.

Results

Consistent with boundary strengthening arguments, my results show slavery shaped the intraracial status hierarchy between Mulattos and Blacks after Emancipation. The model in table 2 shows legacy of slavery is positive and significant, meaning counties with higher historical proportions of slaves had, on average, higher Mulatto–Black occupational inequality, with Mulattos more advantaged relative to their Black counterparts. Although the effect size remains modest, it is important to remember the 19th-century social context, where few occupations were open to African Americans so differences that may seem small by modern standards may have been quite meaningful. Moreover, this article’s primary focus is about establishing slavery’s connection to post-Emancipation color stratification, and building on that focus, I will examine the longer term impacts of these seemingly modest effects in the “Discussion” section.

Table 3. Spatially Robust County-Level OLS Estimates for Mulatto SEI and Black SEI ($n = 623$).

	Mulatto SEI	Black SEI
Intercept	6.14*** (0.75)	7.31*** (0.93)
Legacy of slavery	-0.65† (0.36)	-1.23*** (0.22)
Mulatto %	-1.84*** (0.65)	0.92 (0.82)
Literacy inequality 1880	0.12 (0.07)	-0.04 (0.06)
Schooling inequality 1880	0.02 (0.02)	0.004 (0.01)
Free African descendants	-1.37*** (0.43)	-0.71 (0.59)
Mulatto literacy 1860	0.29* (0.12)	-0.15 (0.11)
Mulatto schooling 1860	-0.24 (0.51)	-0.27 (0.31)
Mulatto real estate 1860	0.20 (0.29)	-0.23 (0.18)
Mulatto personal property 1860	0.22 (0.35)	0.18 (0.16)
White SEI	0.37*** (0.03)	0.26*** (0.03)
White literacy 1880	-1.16† (0.68)	-1.75 (1.06)
White schooling 1880	-0.55 (0.61)	1.57* (0.65)
White real estate 1860	-0.00005† (0.00003)	-0.0001* (0.00004)
White personal property 1860	-0.00002 (0.00004)	-0.00003 (0.00004)
African descendants denied vote	-0.11 (0.30)	-0.28† (0.16)
Manufacturing	0.00000 (0.00000)	0.00000 (0.00000)
Sharecroppers	-0.71 (0.58)	-0.64 (0.54)
Farm owners	-1.82*** (0.54)	-1.53** (0.58)
Mean farm value	.00002 (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0001)
r^2	.44	.32

Note. OLS = ordinary least squares.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .0001$.

The next series of models in table 3 supplements the first by examining Black and Mulatto occupational status separately to gain a deeper understanding of the processes at work. Legacy of slavery is negative and significant for both Mulattos and Blacks, meaning both suffered lower occupational status as the proportion of slaves in 1860 increased, but the magnitude is much stronger for Blacks than Mulattos. This supports the primary hypothesis, suggesting although Mulattos and Blacks both suffered the negative effects of slavery, Blacks seemed to have suffered much more in the long term. Moreover, Mulattos seemed to benefit from some of the advantages of freedom. Literacy in 1860 is positive and significant for Mulatto occupational status, which means Mulattos in counties where they could read and write in 1860 had, on average, higher occupational status in 1880. Conversely, literacy in 1860 is nonsignificant for Blacks. This is evidence the preference for Whiteness that began during antebellum slavery allowed Mulattos to leverage their favorable color to capitalize, however limitedly, on opportunities that Blacks may not have been able to access. While this did not completely shield Mulattos from the negative effects of slavery, it offered a buffer to soften the effects relative to Blacks. This would have positioned Mulattos advantageously as the one-drop rule flatted the distinction between Blacks and Mulattos and the modern system of colorism emerged.

Discussion

These results not only deepen our conceptions of early colorism by demonstrating it is indeed connected the circumstances surrounding chattel slavery, but they also offer insight into some of the specific antebellum mechanisms that created the post-Eman-cipation gap between lighter skinned and darker skinned Black Americans. Most notable is probably the differential effect of slavery on Blacks and Mulattos. Although a variety of sources documented Mulattos' preferential treatment as slaves, until now we understood little about how privileged treatment translated into post-slavery social outcomes, empirically or theoretically. However, the positive effect of slavery on inequality and literacy Mulatto occupational status support the premise that the preference for Whiteness thesis may feed into boundary formation processes that allowed Mulattos to maintain their advantageous position over Blacks even as both suffered from the antebellum system.

However, even though the effect of slavery in my models appears robust but modest, I caution against interpreting a modest effect as not substantively meaningful. It is important to consider these results in historical context. In the 19th century, few occupational opportunities were open to African Americans, either Black or Mulatto, so what we may perceive as a slight difference when viewed through a modern lens may have represented notable differences in the typical life experiences for Blacks and Mulattos of that period. Perhaps more importantly for this study, these seemingly small differences offer a bridge between slavery and contemporary colorism, where Mulattos and light-skinned African Americans are perpetually poised to assume the best of the opportunities available to African Americans. During slavery, that would mean privileged positions on plantations or freedom. During Reconstruction and Jim

Crow, that would mean slightly better occupational status. However, as opportunities for African Americans continued to expand as Jim Crow came to a close and they enjoyed increasing legal protections, lighter skinned African Americans would be prepared for rapid advancement into the middle and perhaps upper classes, which would ultimately manifest in the widespread color stratification we observe today. Therefore, it is important to avoid dismissing ostensibly small differences without considering the historical context and trajectory.

For example, Ruef and Fletcher (2003) found that receiving training in a manual trade as a slave increased a person's post-Emancipation occupational status. Although their data preclude them from accounting for the effect of color or multiracial status in their analyses, they may still provide at least a partial explanation for ongoing inequality between Blacks and Mulattos and demonstrate how certain advantages may seem slight but potentially grow over time. Because Mulattos were reportedly more likely to receive trade training, they would be able to continue to leverage the benefits of those experiences after emancipation, whereas their Black counterparts, denied similar experiences, would lack comparable opportunities. While both Blacks and Mulattos would certainly fall victim to discrimination and racist policy, the training received by former Mulatto slaves and Whites' general affinity for them over Blacks would give them advantages that may have allowed them not only to diminish the adverse effects of slavery but to seize chances as they slowly opened across the following century. Moreover, the intergenerational impact of Mulatto advantage cannot be understated. Mulattos were significantly more likely to marry other Mulattos (Bodenhorn, 2006) and because homogamous Mulatto marriages held more wealth than Mulatto-Black marriages (Bodenhorn, 2006), these families held the potential to leave more wealth to their likely lighter skinned children. Researchers have documented similar marriage practices among lighter skinned and darker skinned Black Americans today, showing lightered skinned Blacks perform better on the marriage market, resulting in partners with higher socio-economic statuses than the partners of darker skinned Blacks (Monk, 2014). In this way, the color stratification created by slavery may have been replicated far beyond the immediate wake of the institution and may have continued to grow over time.

Another major finding is literacy was the primary characteristic of free Mulatto communities that increased occupational inequality by increasing Mulatto occupational prestige post-Emancipation while having no effect on Black occupational prestige. This stands in contrast to schooling and wealth which displayed no measureable effect on inequality or Mulatto occupational prestige. This supports the preference for Whiteness thesis by demonstrating even literate Blacks were unable to translate their literacy into occupational status because they lacked the necessary favor from Whites. However, it also reveals features about the types of opportunities and resources that could be successfully amassed to survive institutional transitions. The strength of literacy as a resource likely boils down to its intangibility in the face of the destruction of the Civil War. Because the war ravaged large swaths of the region and displaced an untold number of communities, all but tiny quantities of Mulatto wealth may have been destroyed, making it an unsuitable vessel to transfer privilege through the

transition from chattel slavery to freedom. Schools were already rare across the region, even for Whites, and the war would have likely destroyed most of those as well. Under these circumstances, literacy was best poised to be a site of longer term opportunity hoarding among Mulattos as it is unable to be destroyed by war as directly as wealth and schools. Literacy could survive to open doors to more prestigious occupations and could even be relatively easily passed down intergenerationally to confer similar benefits to children of literate parents.

As I previously stated, this study serves as the beginning of a bridge between antebellum Mulatto–Black stratification and modern colorism, but there is much more work to be done. The logical next step is to begin to examine the processes that allowed Mulattos to continue to hoard and transmit advantage over time, particularly as formal boundaries between Blacks and Mulattos began to wane and transform into differences in light-skinned and dark-skinned Black Americans.

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Note

1. Although I chose these numbers to match contemporary ideas about entry into the labor market, I also ran sensitivity analyses with slight variations to this age range using 14 as the lower bound and 60 as the upper. The results were consistent.

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