

Defining Race with the U.S. Census

Racial Identity and American Citizenship in the Court The Asian American Education Project

- I. You are part of a group of 1870 Census Takers.** It is your job to interview the people in your community and record them for the U.S. Census in the year 1870. You have been assigned the below three people to interview. Record their race according to your best guess and provide a short explanation describing your reasoning.

Please remember that the 1870 Census allowed only five different racial groups. You must assign each individual to one of the five racial categories used in the 1870 Census: 1) White, 2) Black, 3) Mulatto, 4) Chinese, 5) Indian.¹

Look at the below image for an example of one 1870 Census questionnaire:

Page No. 72 Inquiries numbered 7, 16, and 17 are not to be asked in respect to infants. Inquiries numbered 11, 12, 13 are to be asked merely by an affirmative mark, as /.

SCHEDULE 1. Inhabitants in Amherst, in the County of Mass, enumerated by me on the 4 day of July, 1870.

Post Office: Amherst Mass

1	2	3	4			7	8		10	11		
			4	5	6		8	9		11	12	
1	442-524	Dickinson, William	40	M	W	Lawyer	X	10,000	5,000	Mass		
2		Susan	39	F	W	Wife						
3		Edward	9	M	W	At School						
4		Martha	3	F	W							
5		Cartello, Julia	22	F	W	Domestic Servant		1		Ireland	1	1

From: <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/emilydickinson1870.pdf>

II. Profiles:

- a. My name is Liam Sullivan. I came to the United States from Ireland five years ago with my brother, but my brother died on the ship voyage to this country. In the United States, I work as a physical laborer. Work is unstable and I am often cheated out of my wages. I work alongside many African Americans and Chinese immigrants, and I sometimes need to accept less money than I want so that I can stay competitive, which makes me resentful. I experience a lot of discrimination; sometimes white people refuse to serve me, and strangers on the street will call me things like “a Negro turned inside out.”
- b. My name is Aditya Singh. I came to the United States from India twenty years ago in hopes of a better life. I was able to use my savings to purchase a small tract of land, which I farm with my family. Over the years, we have developed a community of other immigrants from South Asia in my town, and I feel like America is my true home now. However, I still face racism and

ignorance. My skin is darker than virtually all Mulattos² of my acquaintance, and sometimes I am even mistaken for a Negro.

- c. My name is Charity Barnett. I was born in the United States sixteen years ago. My mother and I used to be slaves, and she always swore that our former owner was my father, but he never acknowledged me. It can be awkward for me to walk in public with my mother. My skin is a lot lighter than hers, and shopkeepers end up treating her like she works for me even though I am much younger. Sometimes, when I'm out alone somewhere no one knows me, I act like I'm white and I get a kick out of everyone treating me differently.

III. Explain how you categorize the three people and why. Reflecting on the activity discuss the following questions:

1. How were the racial categories different from how we categorize race today?
 - a. For example, the 2020 Census offers the following categories: White; Black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Chinese; Filipino; Asian Indian; Vietnamese; Korean; Japanese; other Asian; Native Hawaiian; Samoan; Chamorro; other Pacific Islander; some other race.
2. What does the evolution of racial categories throughout history tell us about how society's ideas about race might have changed over the years? Are our current racial categories "better" or more "correct" than before?
3. How do you see race in your own communities? Do certain groups of people receive different treatment than others?
4. If racial categories shift depending on how society views race, then can race be a reliable way of classifying or judging people? Why or why not?

¹For more information on the questionnaire from the 1870 Census, please visit:

https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/questionnaires/1870_2.html

1870 Census Questionnaire Primary Source: One example containing Emily Dickinson's entry is available here: <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/emilydickinson1870.pdf>. Additional examples are available from the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration at www.archives.gov.

²Mulatto: now sometimes offensive: a person of mixed white and black ancestry. Definition is adopted from Merriam-Webster dictionary.