

Red, white, and black: interracial marriage from 1850 to 2000 (Extended Abstract)

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In the United States today, millions of people study their own genealogy and report their results when asked. For example, there are more than 5 million people who reported American Indian ancestry but not American Indian race in Census 2000. In the same census, very few people reported African American or black ancestry without including black as one of their races. In this research, we seek to understand how long-term patterns of interracial unions between blacks, whites, and American Indians underlie and exemplify understandings of ancestry in the United States. We see these understandings as foundational to the current boundaries between race groups; for example, American Indian ancestry is seen as a non-contradictory part of the genealogy of millions of whites, while the boundaries of blackness are more rigidly defined.

We focus this research on two sets of marriages: marriages of blacks to whites and marriages of American Indians to whites. These two groups of interracial unions are uniquely suited to provide both comparison and contrast. They are able to be compared because blacks, whites, and American Indians have been present in the United States since its inception, have been continually enumerated in their own categories, and have been ever-present in the culture's imagination. There are also important distinctions between the two sets of marriages. In stark contrast to discourse surrounding black/white intermarriage, American Indian/white intermarriage has been relatively encouraged as a reasonable cultural boundary to cross and even accepted as a natural extension of federal assimilation policies. The prevalence of these intermarriages at various points in time thus highlights fluctuations in the strength and perceived importance of these boundaries.

In previous research by the first author (*Journal of Family History*, 2006(31)), the prevalence of black/white interracial marriages has been traced and analyzed with respect to the concurrent policies, laws, and social consequences of this oft-vilified type of union. The current paper updates the previous data series provided by Gullickson (2006) with new samples from 1910 and 1930 and provides an important expansion by comparing black/white marriage patterns to American Indian/white marriage patterns over the long term.

Data and Measures

For our analyses, we calculate the odds of a black/white marriage in each decade from 1850 to 2000 (excluding 1890) using census data provided by the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series. To anchor our estimates in the early Census years, we also use the full 100% count data for the 1880 Census, available from the North Atlantic Population Project (for American Indian/white marriages, this serves as a comparison to the 1900 "taxed Indian" population). American Indians living in traditional circumstances were purposely excluded from censuses before 1900, so we begin our main American Indian/white time series in 1900. People who did not report any of their races as black, white, or American Indian are excluded from all analyses. In order to better capture recent marriages, we primarily focus our analyses on marriages involving a husband who is between ages 20 and 30. In instances of very small cell counts, we expand this range to include ages 20 to 40.

We use two different methods to measure the strength of interracial marriage. Our primary measure is the odds ratio. The odds ratio adjusts for compositional issues between populations, and is thus comparable across groups of widely varying size. As may be expected by the historical record, black/white intermarriages are extremely uncommon in early years. The odds of a black person marrying a white partner relative to those same odds for a white person in 1900, for example, are 12:1,000,000 which translates into an odds ratio of 0.000012. This can be seen as a measure of the underlying social distance between blacks and whites. We also make use of the outmarriage ratio, which better captures the lived experience of each group, but does not adjust for compositional issues. Using the same data, we calculate that there were 69 black/white marriages for every 10,000 black/black marriages, and 8 for every 10,000 white/white marriages. We use each of these measures in our description of the long term interracial marriage patterns and interpret each in terms of the social climate of the time.

In addition to the overall trend, we explore several other features of interracial marriage over this time period. For both groups, we analyze differences by gender and education (literacy in the early Censuses). We also analyze regional differences for both groups, although the regional make-up differs for each type of marriage. For black/white marriage, we analyze differences between the South and non-South, while for American Indian/white marriage, we analyze differences between “Indian states” (states with historically large populations of American Indians, mostly Western) and “non-Indian states.”

The measurement of American Indian/white marriage over time presents a special problem not inherent in the measurement of black/white marriage. In contrast to blacks, who hold the legacy of the “one drop rule” of black identification, the number of individuals in any census who identify or are identified as American Indian by race is only a fraction of those who could potentially identify as American Indian. As that fraction increases, it is likely to pull in individuals with less “attachment” to their American Indian identity and thus more likely to be married to whites. Conversely, if that fraction were to shrink, it is likely to incorporate only a “core” group of American Indians who are less likely to be married to whites. It is thus impossible to know with certainty how much of the overall trend in American Indian/white marriage is due to “ethnic switching” and how much is due to a real change in the social distance between American Indians and whites.

We attempt to address this issue by using several techniques to identify American Indians who might be considered “more assimilated” and thus less attached. First, in 1910 we use the tax status of American Indians as an indicator of the level of assimilation, because American Indians living in tribal relations were not subject to taxes. Second, we use the ancestry questions on the Census in 1980, 1990, and 2000, to identify a broader population that recognizes an American Indian ancestry. Third, we use the distinction between Indian and non-Indian states. Since 1960, the first Census to use self-enumeration, “ethnic switching” from white to American Indian has been substantially more common in non-Indian states (Passel 1976; Passel and Berman 1986; Eschbach, Supple, and Snipp 1998; Harris 1994). These measures combined give us some sense of the magnitude of “ethnic switching” on our estimates. We may also include measures of ability to speak and read English, when available.

Preliminary Results

We present some of our preliminary results in Figures 1-4, below.

Figure 1 shows the overall trend in interracial marriage between blacks and whites and between American Indians and whites as measured by the odds ratio. American Indian/white marriages were significantly more likely to be formed than were black/white marriages throughout the time period. It was not until 1980 that the odds of a black/white marriage were roughly comparable to the same odds of marriage for a white/American Indian union in 1900. Given the different discourses around racial boundaries for these two groups, this finding is not surprising. The very definition of whiteness has often been based in contrast to blackness, such that crossing the social boundary between black and white was seen as a very serious threat to whiteness. American Indians have instead been depicted as part of the American story; trappers marrying local Indian women were seen as shrewd businessmen rather than race traitors. Images of the vanishing Indian and of the noble savage have also made American Indian-white intermarriage distinctly non-threatening to the genealogies of American whites. Thus, we expect that American Indian-white intermarriage will be, at all times, more likely than black-white intermarriage.

Both trends correspond with changes in social policy and broader social climate. Black-white intermarriage rates rise and dip through reconstruction, the Jim Crow era of segregation, the civil rights era, and the recent era of multiculturalist discourse. The prevalence of American Indian-white intermarriage increased in the early 1900s and in the 1950s when official policies of assimilation dominated popular discourse about American Indians. In the 1920s and 1930s, federal policies took a more segregationist approach by focusing on reservation governments and intermarriage may have been seen as less socially acceptable (Dippie 1982). The Red Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s may have also had a dampening effect on the formation of interracial marriages by American Indians who were most strongly attached to the identity and the movement. However, the resurgent pride in American Indian heritage was a likely inspiration for many of the identity shifts (to American Indian) by people who were already married to whites. Thus, the net effect of the Red Power movement may have been to increase, rather than decrease, the prevalence of American Indian-white intermarriages.

The results of these trends are reflected in the recognized genealogies of Americans today. Unlike black/white marriage, American Indian/white marriage did not suffer from a decline in the first half of the 20th century. For most African Americans today, any knowledge of white ancestry is genealogically distant and associated with periods of extreme racial inequality (slavery and Jim Crow). For most whites today, knowledge of black ancestry is almost non-existent because the family trees became socially defined as 'black' at the point of first interracial union. For whites of American Indian ancestry, that ancestry is distributed more "equitably" across their family tree, making it both more salient and palatable. The idea of having American Indian ancestry (while remaining white) is sensible to American whites in part because the unions were relatively acceptable at the time and the children often also married whites.

Figure 2 breaks up the overall trend in black/white marriage by the South and the non-South. Both the odds ratio and the black outmarriage ratio are shown. The black outmarriage ratio has consistently been higher in the non-South than the South, but this difference is largely a result of a smaller black population in the non-South than the South. In terms of the odds ratios, the two regions actually have fairly similar patterns. Although the non-South experienced a slower decline than the South during the Jim Crow era, the two regions reached virtually the same nadir point by 1930. Similarly, although the two regions deviated in the trend between 1960 and 1970, they have both been trending upward consistently and converging since 1970. The differential pattern between 1960 and 1970 is most likely attributable to the heavily reactionary stance of the South toward the Civil Rights movement.

Figure 3 provides a view of American Indian/white intermarriage in states with long-term American Indian populations (“Indian states”) versus those with less of a consistent history of American Indian settlement. The largest difference between these states is in the early period. The non-Indian states start with much lower odds of intermarriage, but increase rapidly. Some of this growth is probably attributable to the improvement in enumeration of American Indians living outside of traditional American Indian areas during this period. The trend between 1950 and 1960 is particularly important, because it reflects the shift to self-enumeration on the U.S. Census. This change led to significant “ethnic switching” in non-Indian states. Consistent with our expectation, the odds ratio increased dramatically in non-Indian states, but hardly budged in Indian states. Since 1960, American Indian/White intermarriage has been increasing in both groups of states at a similar rate, suggesting that the overall rise in American Indian/White marriage in the latter half of the 20th century cannot be accounted for simply as a function of “ethnic switching.”

Figure 4 shows that although tax status seems to have been a distinguishing characteristic (or at least a proxy for a distinguishing characteristic), a “taxed Indian” was more likely to be married to an “untaxed Indian” than to a white in 1910. We still see that even taxed Indians’ ability to form an interracial marriage was limited in 1910. .

These results, and others to be included in the final version of this paper, highlight the importance of the fluctuating social climate as a key reason for the patterns of black/white and American Indian/white intermarriage. The combination of public attitudes about race groups and the observed incidence of intermarriage form a foundation for the patterns in the genealogies of Americans today. Social forces and individuals continue to rely on these patterns in genealogies when creating and enforcing the boundaries of race groups.

Works Cited

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Figure 1. The odds ratio of black/white marriage (B) and American Indian/white marriage (I), 1850-2000.

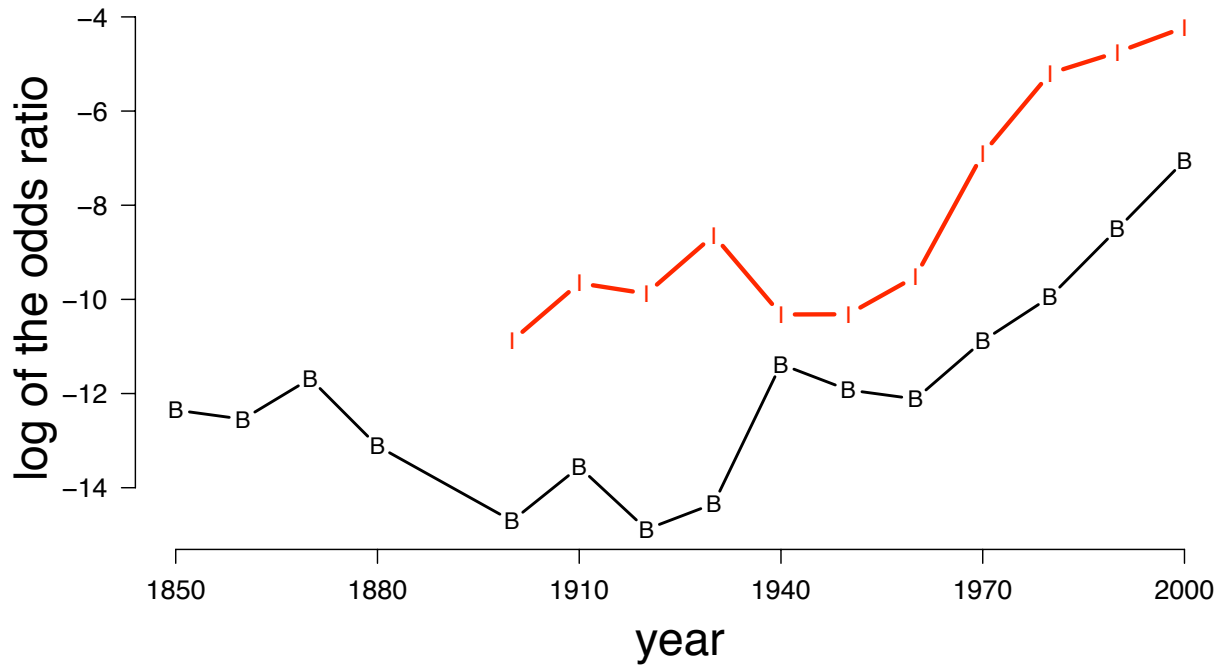


Figure 2. Comparison of black/white marriage trends between the South (S) and the non-South (N), 1850-2000.

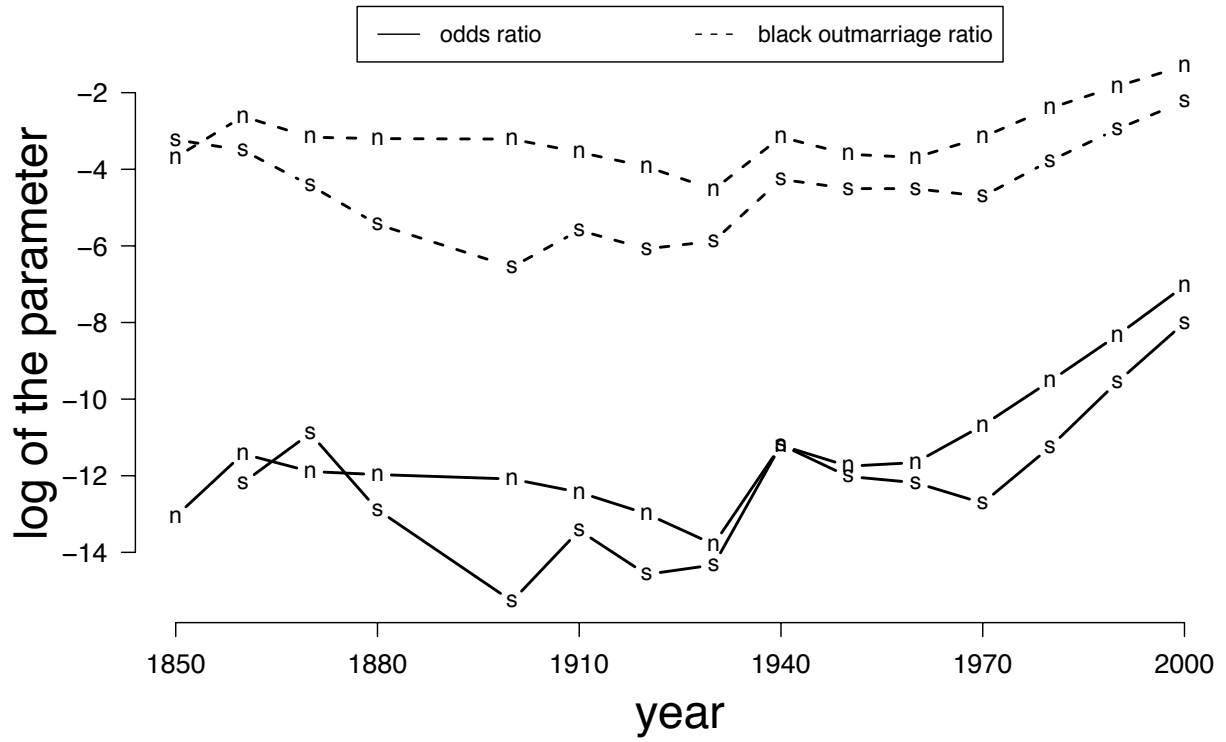


Figure 3. Comparison of American Indian/white marriage between “Indian states” (I) and “non-Indian states” (N), 1900-2000.

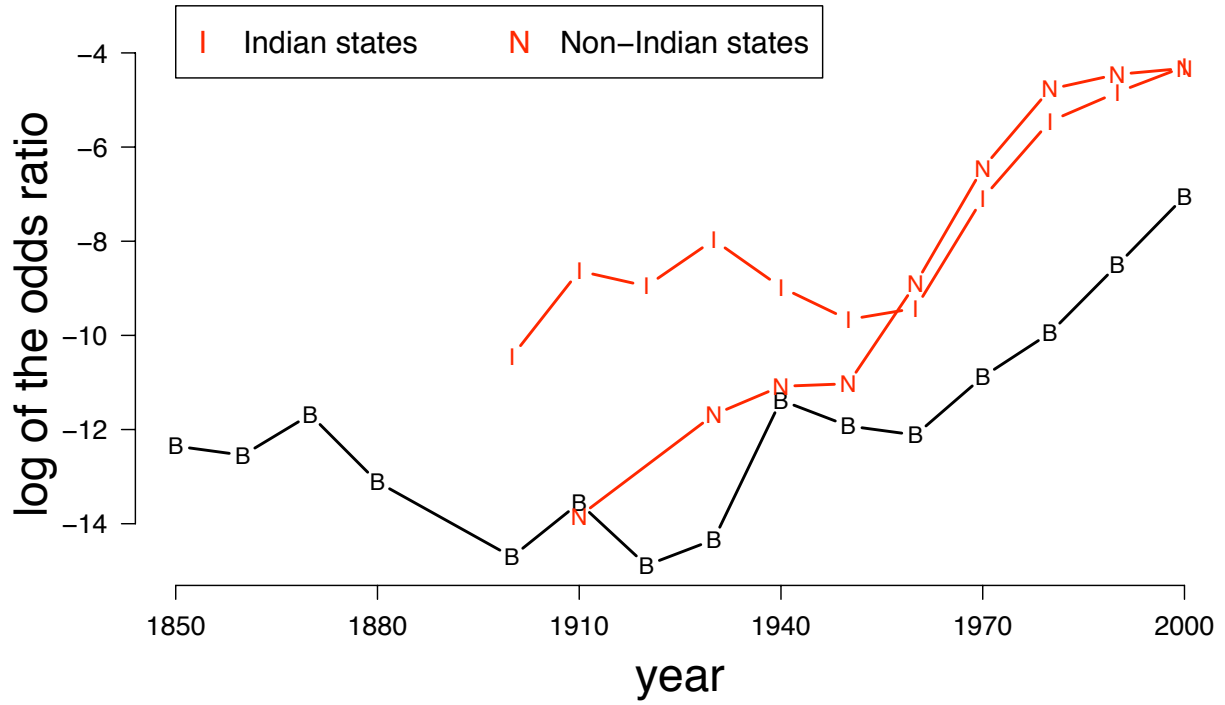


Figure 4. Comparison of the odds of American Indian/white marriage between untaxed and taxed American Indians, 1910.

