

Identity in a Box

Ebony Vandross

BEFORE YOU READ: Do you use a racial or ethnic category to describe yourself? Share and discuss.

Most of us have filled out dozens of forms in our lifetime, but have we ever asked: who decides how to define identity? On the 2020 census, what boxes will we check off when it comes to our racial and ethnic identities? Do the boxes even make sense?

Race is a social (not a scientific) construct. People decide what race means. For the most part, the idea of race has been used to separate people—to elevate one group at the expense of another. Even though it is not a biological reality, it's a powerful source of identity in U.S. society. The census only asks nine questions, and two of them are about race or ethnic origins. Let's examine them.

Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin

Question #8 asks: "Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?" And it boldly states: "For this census, Hispanic origins are not races." According to the form, some examples of people of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin are Mexican, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Ecuadorian, or Spaniard. But what if you are from Brazil, which is part of Latin America, but you don't speak Spanish or identify as Hispanic? What if you are indigenous from Ecuador?

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See "Is Race Real?" by
Ebony Vandross on p. 36 of
the "Talking About Race"
issue of *The Change Agent*.

Should you put Hispanic anyway?

The Census Bureau has its reasons for asking about Hispanic origins. It separates this question from race "because people of Hispanic origin may be of any race(s)."¹

Sociologist G. Cristina Mora reminds us that it was Latino activists who first went to the Census Bureau and advocated for a category that would distinguish Latinos from whites. Before that, the Census Bureau grouped Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans in the same category as Irish and Italian, which was a problem because it didn't reveal Latino poverty rates.²

Now it gets even more complicated.

Are You White?

The next question is: "What is this person's race?" The first box is "White," and it lists "Egyptian" and "Lebanese" as examples of people who belong to the "white" race. But Egypt is in Africa, and Lebanon is in the Middle East. As Egyptian writer and professor Moustafa Bayoumi points out: "Every day, I live my life in America as a brown person. Defining me as white is absurd... To compel everyone from the Middle East and North Africa to select 'white' on the census is to force us to participate in our own official erasure."³

In contrast, consider the Irish. Today, most would consider the Irish to be white, but in the 1860s, “the Irish were part of a separate caste or a

1. www.census.gov/acsf/www/about/why-we-ask-each-question/ethnicity/

2. news.berkeley.edu/2014/04/29/hispanic-label/

3. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/14/arab-american-census-america-racism

‘dark’ race... The Census Bureau regularly collected statistics on the nation’s ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ populations, but kept the Irish distinct from even the latter group. In short, it was by no means clear that the Irish were white.”⁴ Clearly, “race” is constantly evolving.

Black or African American?

Black people have a long and complicated history of representation on the census and in U.S. history. Black people have been categorized as enslaved or free; we have been considered only three-fifths of a person; and our identities have been determined by arbitrary rules like the “one drop” rule.⁵ In response to calls for more accuracy, the census currently provides a space for people to write in the specific ethnic group they identify with. Immigration Specialist Niat Amare says, “I’m African. I identify as black. But I don’t see myself as an African-American... We are black from Africa, we are black from the Caribbean, we are black from everywhere.” In contrast, Fordham University Professor Christina Greer says “I consider myself a JB, which is just black...” Her ancestors were enslaved people. They may be from any number of African countries.⁶

American Indian or Alaska Native?

American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) is another group that continues to struggle with participation in the census for many reasons, including the form literally not having enough space for them to write down their identity. Bois Forte Band of Chippewa tribe member Sidra Starkovich imagines her dad filling out the census and saying, “There isn’t even enough room for me to put my tribe name. I’m not gonna do it, it doesn’t fit me, they didn’t make it for me.”⁷ Finally, the fact

4. Roediger, David. “The Wages of Whiteness.” *Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (2001).


5. www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/mixed/onedrop.html


6. www.npr.org/transcripts/593272215


7. www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/native-americans-census-most-undercounted-racial-group-fight-accurate-2020-n1105096

9. What is Person 1's race?

Mark ☒ one or more boxes **AND** print origins.

☐ White — Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc. 



☐ Black or African Am. — Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc. 

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native — Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc. 

☐ Chinese ☐ Vietnamese ☐ Native Hawaiian

☐ Filipino ☐ Korean ☐ Samoan

☐ Asian Indian ☐ Japanese ☐ Chamorro

☐ Other Asian — Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.  ☐ Other Pacific Islander — Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc. 

Some other race — Print race or origin

that native people didn’t even appear on the census at all until 1860 despite being indigenous to the land is another example of how the U.S. government continues to fail them today.

Asian (But This Is Not a Category?)

The census only began to include people of Asian descent starting in 1860, and the only group distinguished was Chinese.⁸ Today, Asian is not a category. Instead, people of Asian descent must choose what country they or their ancestors are from. Research finds that Asian people are underrepresented in the census and less likely to specify their ethnic identity — with good reason! During World War II, the Census Bureau shared data,

8. www.vox.com/2016/8/18/12404688/census-race-history-intersectionality

which led to the imprisonment of people of Japanese descent. (See pp. 12-13.) “We should be able to identify ourselves to you as who we are, as opposed to having other people identify for us,” says Massachusetts Representative Tackey Chan.⁹

Some Other Race

The Census Bureau understands that race is a social construct. Their website says, “Censuses are not conducted in a vacuum. [The] data reflect the growth of the population as well as the changing values and interests of the American people.”¹⁰

They leave space at the end of the race question for you to list any other race or origin. And at the beginning of the race question, they make it clear that you can check as many boxes as you like.

Representation Matters

It is up to us to continue to demand categorization that properly represents us, because representation matters. From the beginning, marginalized groups have done the work to ensure that every

one is counted. Latino activists pushed to be distinguished from whites. Asian-Americans work to raise awareness and pressure the Bureau to include their demographics in more meaningful ways.¹¹ Due to the tireless efforts of native people, the Bureau will be taking extra effort to reach AIAN communities.¹² Despite repeated exclusion, Americans of Arab descent continue their demand for a Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) response category, which they believe would begin to pave the way for proper census representation of the population.¹³

A striking pattern in most of the census categories for marginalized groups is that they emerged from how these groups were seen by the majority. When thinking about your identity and the identity of your loved ones, who should decide what boxes are available to choose from?

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9. www.statehousenews.com/email/a/2018226?key=426c63c

10. www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/

11. advancingjustice-aajc.org/

12. www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/director/2018/11/the_2020_census_and.html

13. www.aaiusa.org/2020census

Take It Further

What does the author mean when she says race is a social (not a scientific) construct? Look up her article in the “Talking about Race” issue of *The Change Agent* to learn more. Available at <changeagent.nelrc.org>. Online subscription (\$20 per year) required.

Notice the author’s use of footnotes. Compare it to another author’s use of endnotes (see pp. 8-9). Describe the two different approaches. Which would you prefer to use? Why? Next time you write an essay, include footnotes or endnotes.

Practice filling out the census! Visit <nelrc.org/stand-up-and-be-counted/census2020/classroom-resources/> to print out a PDF of a replica of the 2020 Census questionnaire and/or practice on a replica of the online questionnaire. After you fill it out, keep a copy and use it to fill out the real census, once it is available.

