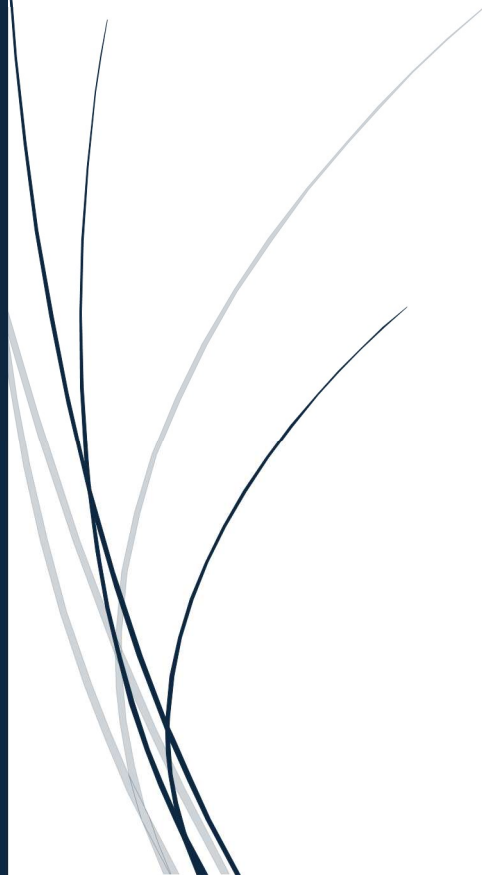




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The Remembrance Papers, Volume IV

The Reclassification Codes:
Erasure Through Naming,
Numbering, and Documentation



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The Reclassification Codes: Erasure Through Naming, Numbering, and Documentation

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Abstract

The story of erasure is not always told in violence or removal—it is often written in forms, files, and falsified names. Volume IV of The Remembrance Papers exposes the bureaucratic and administrative tactics used to redefine, reclassify, and ultimately erase the identities of Black and Afro-Indigenous people across the Americas. From censuses¹ and certificates to school records and burial documents, this paper unpacks how state systems used naming and categorization as tools of control. By exposing these methods, we move closer to restoring the sacred names, lineages, and self-definitions denied to generations.

Introduction: The Power of Paper

In a world governed by documentation, to be misnamed is to be misplaced. The colonial project did not rely solely on physical conquest—it relied equally on the pen. Through clerical codes, arbitrary classifications, and recordkeeping policies, countless people were stripped of their heritage and recorded as something else: Colored. Negro. Mulatto. Slave. Freedman. Other. Unknown.

This volume examines how these terms were not neutral, but deliberately designed to disrupt memory, heritage, and legitimacy.

¹ In the 1930 census, for the first time, individuals who were visibly Native but had any known African ancestry were instructed by enumerators to be classified as "Negro" regardless of tribal ties. This was codified via internal guidance documents but not openly disclosed to the public .

Section I: The Census as a Weapon

From the earliest federal censuses² in the United States, racial categorization was neither scientific nor consistent. It was fluid—shifting with policy agendas, economic interests, and social engineering.

- **1790-1890:** Introduction of terms like "Free Colored Persons," "Mulatto," and "Quadroon"
- **1930 Census:** Enforced the one-drop rule—any African ancestry classified an individual as Black
- **"Indian" Removed:** Many families with tribal heritage were reclassified as Colored or Negro, especially in the Southeast

These reclassifications ensured the erasure of Indigenous affiliation and reduced political claims to land, rights, and reparative justice.

Section II: Birth Certificates, Death Records, and School Rolls

The codification of racial identity into daily life took place at every institutional level:

- **Hospitals:** Midwives and doctors determined race at birth, often inaccurately
- **Schools:** Children of Afro-Indigenous descent were required to attend "Colored" schools, regardless of tribal heritage
- **Death Certificates³:** Many people were buried under incorrect racial classifications, severing lineage in both spiritual and historical records

These bureaucratic misnamings disrupted the transmission of heritage across generations.

² According to the U.S. Census Bureau, prior to 1960, the census takers themselves assigned racial classification, not the individual. This meant subjective assumptions dictated how a person was recorded—often erasing Native ancestry or overemphasizing African heritage, especially in states like Virginia and Louisiana.

³ A 2014 study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* revealed that 13% of African American death certificates contained misclassifications—many labeled simply as "unknown" or even "white" depending on the state or region, particularly in the South

Section III: Reclassified to Disappear

Reclassification⁴ did not merely rename people—it strategically **disempowered them**:

- Denied access to tribal enrollment or federal recognition
- Invalidated oral histories and familial records
- Contributed to land dispossession, as only recognized tribal members were protected under treaty rights

In many cases, reclassification was done without consent, often posthumously or at key moments like land allotment or enrollment.

Section IV: The Right to Self-Name

To reclaim one's true identity is an act of resistance. Today, many descendants of reclassified people are:

- Petitioning for corrections in public records
- Using DNA, oral history, and archival research to rebuild erased family lines
- Creating registries and cultural societies that validate Indigenous and African heritage on their own terms

This movement is not just genealogical—it is **spiritual, legal, and sovereign**.

Section V: Paper Cuts Leave Deep Wounds

What was done with paper must be undone with truth. The act of writing down a false identity is not benign—it is a form of disappearance. But these disappearances were never complete. The people endured. The memory persisted. And now, the return begins with *correct naming*.

This volume honors the ancestors who were misnamed, misfiled, and misplaced—yet never lost.

⁴ In Mississippi and parts of Virginia, school rolls from 1880–1940 often forced students with known tribal names or heritage into “Colored” schools, further disassociating them from cultural identity and land affiliation.

Conclusion: The Erased Are Returning by Name and Number

Paper is not passive. It holds power. For centuries, it was wielded as a weapon—redefining the sacred, overwriting ancestry, reducing nations to checkboxes, and identities to fractions. What was once known in the bones was replaced by bureaucratic ink. And in that sleight of hand, lineages vanished—on purpose.

But the erased are returning.

Through oral histories, reclaimed surnames, uncovered documents, and intuitive knowing, descendants are piecing together what was taken apart. They are asking questions census forms could not contain. They are honoring great-grandmothers listed only as "Negro" when they bore tribal tongues, sacred medicines, and ceremonial knowledge. They are correcting the certificates, not only with fact—but with faith.

To reclaim one's name is not just to challenge a system—it is to disrupt the spell that system cast.

This volume is not only an archive of what was lost—it is a signal of what is rising. Because memory is not buried. It is seeded. And as the soil turns, it blooms once more.

Suggested Readings

- Delilah Beasley, *The Negro Trailblazers of California*
- Edward T. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*
- Virginia R. Dominguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*
- Paul Heinegg, *Free African Americans of North Carolina, Virginia, and South Carolina*
- Karen Tice, *Tales of Wayward Girls and Immoral Women* (for institutional labeling practices)

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