

## REVIEW PAPER

# HOW CATEGORIES SECURITIZE: RACE, RECORDS, AND POWER

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## ABSTRACT

This article centers on categorizations as authoritative acts that sort persons and places, showing how category design itself functions as a mechanism of securitization. Using race as an illustrative case, it demonstrates how people and spaces are marked as risky and made subject to scrutiny even when race is not explicitly named. Drawing on Brubaker's distinction between categorizations and self-understandings, the article examines how U.S. racial status has been historically constructed through layered institutional authorities deploying shifting classificatory techniques that persist into the present. Methodologically, it employs interpretive documentary analysis, triangulating statutes, court opinions, administrative records, census standards, and sentinel cases to trace how race has migrated from explicit legal categories into forms, proxies, and administrative records. These seemingly technical devices continue to route access, attention, and sanction, shaping lived experience without overt racial language. The article's core contribution is a portable analytical framework that links category design to administrative practice and everyday self-understandings. It clarifies why legal thresholds can change without bodies changing, and why formally "race-blind" systems continue to generate durable racialized outcomes.

**Keywords:** categorization, securitization, race, administrative governance, border management

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## 1. Introduction

Categories decide who counts as what and with what consequences. They are the infrastructure that compresses information, allowing officials and systems to act, making cases comparable across time, opening and closing eligibility, authorizing care and coercion, and leaving records that outlast the moment. A category assumes generative power once it is applied by many hands, in many places, and becomes routine.

More precisely, categories: (1) set equivalences, deciding what differences matter; (2) define membership tests (thresholds, lists, reputation, documents); (3) choose granularity that decides how finely to sort and whether boxes can overlap, and (4) fix durability, defining how long labels stick and how they can change. Design choices that decide who may classify, what counts as evidence, where thresholds sit, and how labels port across systems ultimately map directly onto life chances.

Categories do not match self-understandings, but the two interact. They meet when people learn the names given to them, refuse them, or turn them into resources. Moments of danger and hope, such as rebellion, pogrom, protest, or mass mourning, can fuse scattered experiences into a temporary *we*. The solidarities made in those moments, such as claims denied, rolls revised, parcels redrawn, often outlast the flare of feeling. This interplay between external classification and identification is how categories become lived.

These dynamics of categorical design and enforcement are starkly illustrated in the U.S. history of race. Across jurisdictions and decades, authorities used different membership tests to place people on one side of a line or the other. The criteria used were fractions of ancestry, appearance, reputation, and documentary lineage. These thresholds and tests did not reflect nature, but were chosen, applied, and revised by institutions. As explicit racial statutes receded, the same routing capacity migrated into forms and records, such as birth and death certificates, school registers, arrest cards, census schedules, and later administrative databases and scores. The race thus continued to be consulted without being explicitly foregrounded.

This article starts from categorizations, the securitization of their referents, and the authoritative acts of sorting, using race to show how categories acquire and exercise power. Because categories are made, they can be audited and redesigned. The

task is to clearly see the mechanisms through which categorization and securitization occur. In fact, the article purports that securitization, in contrast to the traditional understanding of securitization as speech acts and declarations of emergency, is deeply embedded within routinized administrative systems. These systems, in turn, route risk, scrutiny, and exception. This addresses the gap – what happens after declarations are made, which is precisely the persistence of securitization through categorization. Speech acts pass – categories persist.

## 2. Literature Review and Methodological Considerations

This study draws on and synthesizes several literatures. Brubaker (2002, 2004) distinguishes external categorizations from internal identifications (self-understandings) and urges analysts to treat “groupness” as a variable that surges in particular moments rather than as a constant essence. This distinction clarifies how administrative labels can precede and then shape felt identities, especially when labels are taken up by political entrepreneurs or embedded in routine paperwork.

Hacking (1995, 1999) offers the mechanism that describes the mutual constitution of categorizations and self-understandings. Once a label is written into rules and forms, people adjust how they identify and how they document themselves in order to qualify or avoid sanction. Agencies then revise the label’s tests, fields, and thresholds to stabilize their workflows. Over time, the label and the labeled co-evolve. That co-evolution is exactly where categories do their distributive work, through school rosters, eligibility screens, and enforcement databases.

Bowker and Star show how classification lives inside infrastructures and becomes most powerful when it is taken for granted as part of everyday systems (2000). Their insight helps track the evolution of racialization from explicit to more implicit terms, where it governs without being loudly announced. Once categories are coded into schemas, interfaces, and standard operating procedures, they allocate care and coercion by default.

Omi and Winant (2014) frame racial formation as the co-production of meaning and structure through racial projects that link ideas to institutions. This framework keeps the analysis attentive to both discourse and organization, showing how rules, budgets, and recordkeeping stabilize shifts

in common sense. Fields and Fields (2012) call the naturalization move “racecraft,” arguing that racism’s effects are repeatedly misrecognized as the properties of races themselves. That concept helps pry apart appearance from mechanism and keeps the focus on work that categories do rather than on their purported essences.

In the context of securitization, the work draws on the reiteration of the traditionalists’ view, with securitization seen as a speech act with concrete (pragmatic) effects. Not only do political actors or agents utter “*securityness*” into existence, working within the appropriate semantic realm, but they also incorporate the external (contextual) domain towards this effort (Balzaq, 2005). Balzaq clearly enunciates how securitization, to be felicitous, has to follow both linguistic and contextual rules. However, on its own, language is not the constructor of realities; rather, it shapes the audience’s perceptions of it. Moving the audience’s attention away from a certain issue, or a view of it, making them see the referent object as securitized, comes down to the linguistic competence and the contextual materials readily available for securitization to occur.

Securitization operates not only through rhetoric but through administrative processes, which escalate from politicization to threat. Beyond speech acts, categorization makes securitization durable by embedding it into routine governance (Buzan et al., 1998). This social construction of a threatening issue, at an opportunistic turning point, at which action is to be taken, is rather intersubjective as implied by the interaction between the securitizing agent and their audience.

This construct, articulated in the form of an imminent or looming danger to be addressed by measures beyond those appropriate in times of desecuritization, lies behind the engineering of speech artifacts, routinized categorization, and proxy mechanisms that make securitization actionable. Today, there exist entire sets of professionals tasked with the “management of unease,” gaining legitimacy precisely through this construction, securitization, and categorization of previously non-securitized subjects (Bigo, 2002). Therefore, the process of securitization has become highly context-driven and self-actuating, directly related to the constructs of politics, control, and territorial boundaries as well as their protection from external forces.

For this process to work, securitization cannot be merely spoken into existence through speech acts that justify extraordinary measures. It is instead engineered and operationalized through those administrative and bureaucratic operations that make those categories visible. This approach helps address the process of securitization as empirically tractable, in which categories are embedded into forms, training manuals, police reports, scoring boards, and so on. Once entered into those classification infrastructures, they begin routing attention, resources, and potential. It is this approach that the work takes on securitization as a transformation from classification to governance – securitization is not a purely rhetorical act but a socio-technical process heavily embedded within claim-making and classification design.

Law and measurement are the two main sites where these dynamics harden. Haney López (1996) shows how courts and statutes constructed race in the United States, sometimes through avowed “common sense” and sometimes through strained appeals to science, producing consequential boundaries of belonging and exclusion. Snipp (2003) details how federal standards and census practices define racial options, revise them, and thereby shape what becomes legible to the state and to researchers. On the other hand, Bigo (2002) critically examines the securitization and framing of migration through the lens of danger and outside threat, the outsider inside (the state), examining who and how gets to be defined as an (im)migrant. Finally, Giray and Ceren (2021) and Schöll et al. (2024) address the highly contested infusion of border management with data collection instruments with overly disproportionate yields, raising concerns over data protection, supervision of surveillance, and what the utilization of novel technologies could mean for the future of migration.

Together, these literatures justify analyzing race not as a property but as a set of administrative and discursive devices that sort people, distribute life chances, and generate durable paper trails. They motivate a design-focused lens and help track portability across systems, since labels often travel from one registry to another and gain force through repetition.

The approach taken is interpretive and documentary. It follows racial categories through publicly available materials to trace how they are designed, circulated, and used in practice. These include legislative acts, court opinions, attorney general circulars, administrative manuals, and federal standards for enumeration. Selection is

purposive and question-driven. It departs from moments when authorities revised category design or measurement standards, then read backward and forward to see how those changes were justified, how they traveled across agencies, and how they were taken up in everyday administration. Two historical episodes, Wilmington in 1898 and Tulsa in 1921, serve as brief vignettes that show the administrative afterlives of violence by revealing how classification shaped claims to property, relief, and recognition, and how records later enabled denial, revision, or erasure. More contemporary materials, such as landmark European Court of Human Rights judgments, e.g. *Sejdić-Finci* cases, as well as technical EU documents and civil society monitoring, triangulate constitutional, administrative, and practical evidence across legal and daily settings.

The analysis draws on a close reading of literature on classification and racial formation. For each document, it considers how it sets equivalences, which membership tests it specifies, how specific the sorting is, the durability of labels, as well as how change is processed. The incentives that are attached to labels are tracked where documents make them visible, for example, eligibility rules or exposure to sanctions, and those cues are used to reconstruct how labels move people through or around institutions. Where the documentary trail permits it, the analysis links shifts in written standards to changes visible in forms and routines. Validity rests on light triangulation across what statutes prescribe, what forms capture, and how press or organizational sources describe normal practice.

This is a desk-based study limited by what is digitized and preserved, and coverage varies by place. Because classifications feed back into how people describe themselves and how experts work, accounts are subsequently read alongside records from the time, and noted where later use may have altered meanings. Within these limits, the article shows how categorizations route people through institutions, shaping who gets care and who faces sanction, and how race can fade from law yet persist in forms and databases that still sort lives.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

#### 3.1 Making Race: Authority and Techniques

If we begin where Brubaker tells us to begin, not with “races” as objective properties but with categorizations, the American archive looks different. What comes into view is a chain

of decisions about who counts as what, set by lawmakers and courts and carried into routine by schools, enumerators, and police, then taken up by private actors. A single entry on a birth or marriage certificate could alter marriage eligibility or school placement, and census race data guided districting and civil rights enforcement. As overt racial statutes receded, the routing moved to forms and databases, such as registries, criminal records, and scoring tools, sorting people without naming race. The categories thus travel through paperwork and allocate care and coercion.

One might begin with the question of why build categories at all? The earliest durable push was economic. Plantation slavery wanted a stable, inheritable labor force. In 1662, Virginia fixed hereditary status in law with *partus sequitur ventrem*, making a child’s status follow the mother (Virginia General Assembly, 1662). Skin color influenced social treatment and sometimes courtroom inferences, but it was not the primary administrative test. For administration, status was tied to descent and documents. In the 20th century, Virginia’s Racial Integrity regime required registrars to record and police racial entries on birth and marriage certificates, making classification portable across agencies (Wolfe, 2020). Even where observation was used, as in federal census taking, it was channeled through rules and category schemas, including the late-19th and early-20th century guidance on “mulatto,” “quadroon,” and “any perceptible trace of African blood.” The subsequent removal of “mulatto” in 1930 showed preference for codified standards over naked inspection (U.S. Census Office, 1890; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1930; Snipp, 2003). In this sense, “race” in law functioned less as a reading of bodies than as a workflow for managing persons, a legal shorthand for who could be compelled to labor, excluded from rights, and denied claims.

To see how arbitrariness became common sense, we must look to education. Textbooks, museum exhibits, teacher-training materials, and popular science translated racial typologies into everyday pedagogy, making them intuitive to officials who filled in forms and to publics who read the news (Zimmerman, 2002; Baker 1998; Kevles 1985). What mattered for governance was not whether human variation exists, but how variation was scripted into categories that could be filed, taught, and enforced (Stern, 2005; Snipp, 2003). In practice, claims about “nature” ratified the categories and extended their reach into schools, courtrooms, and offices. Popular and para-scientific works such as Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* helped fix these

scripts in the public sphere (Grant, 1916; Baker, 1998). The sequence ran from practice to theory: economic and administrative needs came first; racial “science” arrived later to rationalize what law and bureaucracy had already put in place (Fields, 1990; Kevles, 1985).

Moreover, authority to classify was never singular. Colonies and states made their own law, and federal naturalization courts developed their own tests. Because authority was layered rather than unitary, the same person could be differently classified by different institutions at the same time. A county clerk might treat a petitioner as white for marriage, while a school board might read the same family as colored for attendance. A federal official might treat a Mexican national as white for naturalization, while local custom did not (Pascoe, 2009). This institutional pluralism should not be mistaken for tolerance, as it produced room for discretion rather than freedom. Where rules were ambiguous or contested, the power to decide slid downward to those positioned at what we might call the *counters and desks* of governance. Clerks, enumerators, principals, and patrol officers made consequential choices beneath the notice of courts (Snipp, 2003).

The techniques of classification likewise varied, as different methods coexisted and were opportunistically mobilized. Fractional ancestry rules set thresholds, such as one-quarter, one-eighth, one-sixteenth, purporting to calibrate racial membership by blood (Warnke, 2007). In practice, these were conventional fictions enacted through testimony and reputation, not measurement. No assay could fix ancestry to a percentage. Thresholds were not only malleable across decades but were also enforced through interpretation by powerful individuals. A judge might find a plaintiff “white enough” for marriage despite genealogical rumors, and a registrar might accept a family’s representation one year and reverse it the next after a local scandal (*ibid*).

Where fractional rules promised nuance, “one-drop” logics erased it. Under one-drop standards in many jurisdictions, and in federal statistical practice by 1930, any known African ancestry was enough to classify a person as Black regardless of appearance or social setting (Davis, 1991; Pascoe, 2009). Courts reinforced both fractional and one-drop approaches with appearance tests that asked witnesses to speak to complexion, hair, and features, and with reputation evidence about how a person was known in the neighborhood. They also relied on lineage, especially maternal descent,

and on paper trails in freedom and status suits (Gross, 2008).

To make the arbitrariness concrete, we can take the example of Virginia’s moving line. In 1785, the General Assembly defined a “mulatto” as anyone with one-fourth or more “negro blood”, or having a Black grandparent, so less than one-fourth could be treated as white. In 1910, the threshold tightened to one-sixteenth (General Assembly of Virginia, 1785). By the late 1920s and into 1930, the regime had effectively codified a one-drop logic under the Racial Integrity Act and its amendment (Wolfe, 2020). In the courts, freedom and status suits often turned on maternal lineage (*partus sequitur ventrem*) and on physical proxies such as hair texture and community reputation, where long straight hair and an “Indian” reputation were taken as evidence of non-African descent.

Other states followed a parallel arc. In the mid-19th century, Arkansas state compilations defined a “mulatto” as someone with one Black grandparent; thus, a one-quarter rule was enforced (Encyclopedia of Arkansas, 1859). By the early twentieth century, Arkansas statutes in certain domains (e.g., school and railroad segregation) defined a “negro” as someone with one-sixteenth “African blood,” and courts heard expert and lay testimony about appearance and hair to operationalize that threshold. Before 1911, other Arkansas provisions spoke more vaguely of a “visible and distinct admixture” of African ancestry. In South Carolina and elsewhere, courts also weighed reputation, or how a person was known in a neighborhood, alongside lineage papers and physical proxies (Tucker v. Blease, 97 S.C. 326, 81 S.E. 668 (S.C. 1914), as discussed in Wertheimer, 2011).

These old categories do not simply disappear when new ones are created. Government offices translate them so that records and statistics keep working. Vital records offices still issue delayed birth certificates when no original exists, using early church or hospital records as proof (NCHS, 2011). Statistical agencies convert new race categories to old ones so numbers can be compared across years. After 2000, respondents could mark more than one race. To preserve trend lines, NCHS produced “bridged-race” estimates that reassigned multiracial reports back to single-race series. This translation step changes who appears in each group and therefore shapes the rates and comparisons used for monitoring and programs (Ingram et al., 2003).

After civil rights reforms narrowed explicit race laws, racial categorization did not stop. It changed form. In federal statistics, people now self-report race on questionnaires, and one federal standard sets the list of official race categories that agencies use. That is still racial categorization, only by self-identification rather than by an enumerator (Snipp, 2003). When a file does not record race, institutions often reconstruct race from other data. Banking regulators estimate a borrower's race from surname and home address for fair-lending tests. That is racial categorization by proxy, used for enforcement (CFPB, 2014). Police use location-based risk tools that track racially segregated space, so place becomes a stand-in for race and directs surveillance toward the same communities (Richardson et al., 2019). That is racial categorization through a different field on the form (Pager, 2003).

A defender of common sense might object that this emphasis on authority and technique underestimates the reality of physical difference and the salience of culture; however, the argument here is not that bodies are irrelevant or that people are duped by paperwork. It is that bodies and cultures do not come with a political meaning attached. Meaning is assigned by the authorities of classification and stabilized by techniques that claim to read essence but in fact organize belonging and exclusion. The very oscillation between fractional finesse and one-drop absolutism tells us that coherence is not the goal. The goal is operability that works for the purposes at hand: policing marriage, fixing school funding, disciplining labor, allocating credit, staffing juries, and legitimating force.

Understanding authority and technique this way clarifies the work of the category across domains. A woman classified as "colored" could not marry a white man and would see her children sent to a different school. A man categorized as white could buy property in neighborhoods closed to his darker-skinned neighbors and qualify for mortgages his neighbors could not. A veteran might be read one way by the federal government and another by county authorities and receive or be denied compensation accordingly. In this sense, the category also securitizes people and places by marking them as risks and authorizing special scrutiny and control.

### **3.2 Uptake and Looping: Self-Understandings and Administrative Afterlives**

Treating race as a category does not reduce people to mere outputs of classification.

Brubaker also warns us to treat categorizations by authorities separately from self-understandings, or how people consider themselves. Both should also be separated from the ideas of commonality as perceived shared traits and connectedness as social ties between people. This dissection tells us that rather than thinking of groups as fixed entities, it is analytically advantageous to operate with the variable of groupness, which speaks of episodic "we-feeling" that can surge and fade. These diverse concepts may interact but are analytically distinct and do not always move together (Brubaker, 2004; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000).

We will focus here on how racial categories shape self-understandings about race. Labels set the scripts and incentives that people meet in schools, courts, offices, and markets. The U.S. evidence shows this both across time and within lives. Under Jim Crow and the Virginia Racial Integrity regime, registrars and courts policed racial entries on birth and marriage records and pursued cases of "racial fraud." These practices trained families in how to declare ancestry and what documents to present, and they prompted changes in self-identification in order to marry, enroll children, or avoid sanctions (Dorr & Taylor, 2001; Gross, 2008). Panel studies in the contemporary period show patterned change as well. After life events such as incarceration or unemployment, respondents were more likely to be classified as Black by interviewers, and some subsequently altered how they reported their own race. Race moved with treatment and position rather than standing as a fixed essence (Saperstein & Penner, 2012).

Institutional menus also press learning and reshape how people see themselves. Migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean meet U.S. forms that separate race from Hispanic origin and offer a small set of race boxes. Over time, many adopt U.S. panethnic and racial labels in schools, workplaces, and agencies (Roth, 2016). A similar pattern appears in the assembly of "Hispanic" and "Asian American" as panethnic labels. Policy standards, media practice, and organizational work on campuses and in advocacy helped move dispersed national origins into shared names. Those names, in turn, supported coalitions, student groups, and civil associations that would have been harder to build under narrower labels. The label thus changed perceived commonality and built new ties (Mora, 2014; Okamoto, 2014).

An important dynamic in the internalization of categories is their iteration. Each time a clerk asks for race on a license, a registrar checks a

certificate, or a school form is completed, the script is rehearsed. Repetition teaches which answers are credible or costly and trains families how to narrate ancestry and identity. Because these practices now have deep historical roots, the labels come to feel like timeless natural facts rather than administrative choices. Yet, contemporary panel studies show self-reports continue to shift with institutional treatment. Migrants learn U.S. menus and adopt panethnic and racial labels, as those menus are repeatedly consulted across schools and agencies. The category is thus performed into being through repeated encounters, and self-understandings move with that performance (Dorr & Taylor, 2001; Pascoe, 2009; Saperstein & Penner, 2012; Roth, 2016).

At this point, we can turn to groupness – the episodic surge of we-feeling that helps sediment self-understandings. Surges during crises leave files, decisions, permits, and rulings that harden or soften boundaries after the crowds disperse. Think of the lingering effects of the Civil Rights Movement, the unrest after Rodney King, and the protests after George Floyd’s murder. Through these administrative afterlives, categorization, politicization, and self-understanding continue to coevolve over time (McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984). In sum, evidence across periods shows labels shaping how people come to see themselves through historical policing of racial entries in vital records, training families to narrate ancestry in official terms. Repetition across generations naturalizes these labels, and episodic surges of groupness leave records that carry new identities and rules forward into routine administration (Brubaker, 2004; Dorr & Taylor, 2001; Saperstein & Penner, 2012; Roth, 2016; McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984).

### **3.3 From Statute to Form: The Evolving Work of the Category**

Throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the power of race categories moved from statutes into the forms that people fill out and the databases that agencies maintain. Rather than making race less potent, the drift into form made it ordinary. Today, racial profiling persists, often by proxy. Patrol maps, stop criteria, and gang lists rely on location, prior stops, and criminal-history flags that encode earlier discretionary choices, steering attention to the same Black and Latino neighborhoods. Courts and federal investigators have documented racial profiling and unconstitutional stops, and predictive tools built on such data reproduce the profiling unless inputs and oversight are corrected (Floyd v. City of New York, 2013; U.S. Department of Justice, 2015; Richardson et al., 2019).

Contemporary flashpoints make the loop visible. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the killing of Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, and Stephon Clark, among other cases of excessive use of force by the authorities, illustrate the outcomes of securitization logic within the loop. That is, categorization authorizes scrutiny and sanction, justifying exceptional measures. These cases exhibit the long-standing operationalization of categorical proxies such as location, prior contact, and assumed criminality. These, in turn, function as substitutes for race within administrative systems. Additionally, Blackness and poverty were rhetorically associated with danger and suspicion. The labels of a “dangerous Black male” or a “Black criminal,” as well as a proxy of a “drug house” – as with the Taylor case – were encoded through categorical fields, which legitimized extraordinary and overbroad responses (Moghe, 2020; Smyton, 2020).

The effects of the (re)production of historical categorizations and labeling of social groups are multiplying precisely because categories are durable and portable. From overpolicing and public service neglect, to unequal treatment by the criminal justice system, in which black men are up to five times more likely to be policed than whites (DeSilver et al., 2020), they travel across institutional settings, generating cumulative effects as labels designed for one purpose are used to justify surveillance, exclusion, and the neglect of others. The four cases reveal how securitization shapes subsequent accountability. In instances where individuals were labeled as an “armed threat” or “noncompliant,” regardless of what later turned out to be true, these categorical labels structured the subsequent authority reactions. Once entered into reports and files, such classifications continued to proliferate in police reports, court files, and jury deliberations, stabilizing the narrative of necessity, shaping accountability processes, and insulating decisions from being challenged (Najdowski, 2023; Goff et al., 2014; Fagan & Geller, 2015).

Going back in time, sentinel cases such as the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre exemplify how racial categories, once stabilized in administrative and legal practice, can be swiftly mobilized as securitizing devices. Fear-rousing myths of Black men as violent rapists of white (men’s) women showcase the processes of rigid categorization driven by the securitization of a minority group into an existential threat. These myths did not operate in isolation; rather, they activated the pre-existing categorical distinctions, allowing state authorities and white mobs to undertake extreme measures, forming the so-called looping effects of rhetoric and

framing, together with securitization embedded within administrative design (Groff Spikes, 2025).

While the former – rhetoric and framing – served to transform the perception of the Black community as prosperous into a community posing an existential threat, ultimately leading to both immediate and long-term consequences, the latter – policing choices, seizure of property, and lack of legal remedies – operationalized the framing and enabled large-scale violence. A spark igniting the violence could not have penetrated throughout an entire community without pre-existing racial categories that had organized recognition, suspicion, and entitlement, providing the administrative and moral groundwork and allowing for the rapid escalation to appear intelligible and justified.

Once the “Black Wall Street,” the Greenwood district witnessed one of the worst cases of racially-motivated violence, with the aid of authoritative categorization and the subsequent process of securitization in which local police forces untied the hands of violent white mobs, deputizing them and allowing their participation in the assault (U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2021). The frame of “Black criminality,” framed through discursive practices and the perceived economic threat of the black community, fostered by emotion-rousing myths, resulted in bloody escalation demanding urgent action (Messer et al., 2018). The institutional approach to research and reparations after the event continued to reflect securitized categorization, labeling the massacre as an uprising and a riot, deliberately shielding insurance companies from paying for the financial recovery of victims (Groff Spikes, 2025).

The same categorical logic that securitized populations through policing, ultimately spilling over into urban reform and infrastructural design, continues to shape U.S. neighborhoods even today. Zoning, redevelopment, and “blight” labels were increasingly being translated into spatial categories, making infrastructure into an administrative extension of securitization. How securitization went above mere policing or data collection methods and embedded itself in the spatial organization of everyday life is evident in the example of Dallas, Texas. During the 1940s and ‘50s, the construction of major interstate highways not only connected the north and south in terms of transportation, but it also cut across predominantly Black and Latino communities, which were once thriving cultural and economic zones. South Dallas’s Tenth Street, a lively spot for African Americans, together with the

wider Oak Cliff neighborhood, was cut through and isolated by Interstate 35E, a concrete manifestation of once-racially discriminatory zoning policies (Goodman, 2017; Holliday, 2017).

Specialized agencies dealing with urban development, such as the National Highway Administration, opted for a fresh slate, justifying the clearance of entire neighborhoods, shaping future investment patterns, and isolating capital access rather than investing in and rebuilding existing infrastructure. So-called urban surgery resulted in demonstrable racializing outputs of deliberately creating physical barriers preventing contact and interaction between the white elite and the “declining” black districts, privileging the former at the expense of those vulnerable (Roberto & Hwang, 2017). These structures, zoning policies, and urban development plans materialized categorical distinctions by translating racialized assessments into spatial classifications. Through the securitizing logic of categorization, mapping it onto geography, imposing everlasting labels, and hijacking infrastructure itself into an agent of policing of mobility and belonging, urban development became a durable administrative record.

Such cases, files, and rules outlast the protests and change how agencies collect, report, and audit stops, force, and complaints. These moments show that racial categorization and securitization, once operating within the bounds of roads and zoning, now circulate through administrative and digital systems through forms, databases, the street in patrol patterns and stop decisions, not only through statute. Although the instruments have shifted from concrete barriers to digital filters, the categorical architecture persists. It is digital systems of today that have inherited earlier classifications based on historical labels and translated them into data fields, risk scores, and thresholds, thereby reproducing securitization through routine administrative processing rather than explicit declaration.

This is not an argument against data. To the contrary, the distributive effects of categorization instruments have not weakened; they have only become more difficult to observe. In fact, what should ensue is the acknowledgement of how securitizing logic under categorization is more than forms and statutes, or even infrastructure. It is a matter of inheritance – categories labeling and shaping people and space also fix those data-driven models, arrest records, and the provision of public services. There is a need for acknowledgement that these securitized hierarchies have not been

dissolved with the transition from physical to digital governance; they have been rearticulated. Prior labels of “dilapidated” or “run-down” organizing entire neighborhoods now feed information systems with “risk” and “probability”; therefore, no new categories per se, but old scripts rewritten anew.

In this sense, models trained on arrests will replay discretionary patterns unless inputs are replaced or reweighted, and patrol or stop tools will operationalize racial profiling by proxy unless they are audited at input and review. Appraisal and underwriting will reproduce redlining unless counterexamples and independent checks are built in. The task is to map where proxies enter the workflow, how they were constructed, and who is accountable for their effects. Without routine disparate-impact tests, public error reports, and clear remedies, the category runs uninspected.

Because the category now lives in workflows, reform must act there. The questions are concrete. In a traffic stop, where is race or its proxy consulted? It may enter at the decision to stop, in the narrative on the report, in the supervisor’s review, in the analyst’s aggregation, in the meeting where targets are set, and in the courtroom where suppression is argued. What is the envelope of discretion at each point, what reasons must be given, and to whom? In a loan file, where is race or its proxy consulted? Is it at prequalification, at the appraisal, at underwriting, or at quality control? Which fields are mandatory, and who audits exceptions? In school discipline, when does race or its proxy appear? Does it implicitly do work at classroom referral, at the principal’s decision, or at the board’s appeal? Each of these questions points to a lever of power that can widen or narrow the route by which categories move people through institutions.

Since numbers are outputs of classification choices, membership must evolve in step. When standards change – for example, when separate race and ethnicity questions become one combined item or when a new aggregate category is added, trend lines bend. That bend may reflect real demographic change, shifts in self-reporting, or a change in the categories themselves. Agencies should treat nonreporting and slow adoption of updated standards as governance failures, not harmless delays. Missingness is political. It is a hole in the map where accountability should be.

With the drift into form, the politics sits in the category regime. Apparent gains or gaps can reflect how race is defined and recorded, not the change

on the ground. Power lies in who sets and adopts the boxes, what counts as a stop or a force incident, which fields are required, how “other” and missing values are handled, and where proxies such as address or arrest history are introduced. Unless the regime in force is stated, in the standards used, the level of adoption, and the error profile, comparisons risk measuring forms rather than worlds.

### **3.4 Exportability: Categories Beyond the U.S. (the Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina)**

Categories concentrate power wherever officials use identity boxes to decide access to office, resources, or protection. They do more than permit or deny. They mark some people as threats and others as protected, set targets for policing and welfare, and supply political resources for identity entrepreneurs. Leaders and media can turn labels into danger signals, so everyone assigned to a category, whatever their self-understanding, is cast as a rival other. For scholars and practitioners who aim to advance rights and desecuritize targeted groups, the key questions are practical: what actions does the category trigger, who benefits, who is exposed, and what stories are employed to justify its use?

Points in history illustrate these processes. During apartheid in South Africa, quasi-scientific, discriminatory racial classifications, theorized and put into practice by “obedient rule-followers,” produced a corpus of more than 3000 pages of racial law (Bowker & Star, 2000). The institutionalization of classification gave credence to segregation and all sorts of humiliation and hurt, entrenching deep, socially-constructed dichotomies effects of which are present today. In Rwanda, ethnic entries on national ID cards, introduced under Belgian rule and retained into the 1990s, let militias and soldiers select victims at roadblocks during the 1994 genocide. The label on the paper became a death sentence (Mamdani, 2001).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), from 1992 to 1995, ethnic labeling organized checkpoints, detentions, expulsions, and the seizure and reassignment of homes. Maps and lists guided the work of “cleansing,” and those same records later anchored postwar property and return policies that tried to unwind it (Toal and Dahlman, 2011). After the Yugoslav wars, ethnic categories continued to do the work of differentiation and collectivism, producing status disparities. In post-Dayton BiH, categorization is constitutional and administrative at once. The constitution names Bosniaks, Croats,

and Serbs as constituent peoples and reserves the state Presidency and House of Peoples to those labels, excluding the residual “Others” from key posts. The discriminatory effect of this design was confirmed in the Sejdić and Finci case of the European Court of Human Rights (EctHR, 2009). The “ethnic key” extends the logic across the public sector by tying hiring and representation to preset ethnic balances, encouraging strategic self-identification, leading to bizarre cases where members of the same family adopt different labels to navigate opportunity. It also shapes voting patterns and everyday self-descriptions, which often align with political incentives rather than with felt identity.

Beyond BiH, the neighboring systems in the former Yugoslavia exhibit similar collectivist mechanics with implications for individual disparities. Croatia guarantees national minority representation through special rolls and reserved seats. This can protect minority voices, yet it also fixes identities in electoral administration (Republic of Croatia, 2002). Serbia recognizes national minority councils that run education and media in their languages. This supports cultural rights while also routing resources and recognition through official lists (Republic of Serbia, 2009). These are not identical to U.S. race rules, but the file work is comparable. Categories on forms structure who can speak for whom, who can apply for which post, and how audits are done.

This is not to outright deny that such categorization can have a role in managing conflict and ensuring equality along major cleavages. Belgium’s power-sharing allocates posts and budgets across language groups and requires cross-group consent in many federal decisions, which has stabilized competition even as it entrenches segmented administration (Lijphart, 1977; Deschouwer, 2012). Northern Ireland’s Good Friday Agreement created power sharing with group “designations” in the Assembly and cross-community voting rules, which reduced violence and brought former enemies into routine government while keeping categories salient in legislative files and appointments (Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations [Good Friday Agreement], 1998; McGarry & O’Leary, 2006a, 2006b). South Africa uses race categories in the Employment Equity Act and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment to repair apartheid’s legacies, with a remedial rather than exclusionary intent (Republic of South Africa, Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998; Republic of South Africa, Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act No. 53 of 2003).

Another case in point is the proliferation of securitization – elsewhere, Westernization – of migratory flows and the transnationalization of surveillance. Exemplified by the European Union’s internationalization of border security and the proliferating border controls, driven by securitarian discourse ever since the signing of the Schengen Agreement in 1985, it speaks to the understanding of migration as a social construct, with a strong aspect of securitization of individuals’ decisions transgressing politicians’ speech acts. Interesting is yet only the case of the EU’s controls in relation to non-EU migration flows, as it is there where the labeling, categorizing, and securitizing occur, allowing EU citizens, as Bigo (2002) says, to forget that they are also immigrants within the EU.

On top of this is the second part of the process, the adoption of technological advancements as a tool allowing for group-level categorizations, which, in turn, become labeled as a risk. From this angle, migration necessitates the adoption and modernization of border management tools, such as artificial intelligence, biometric data, and facial recognition, as well as the creation of entire agencies dedicated to the “management of unease” (Bigo, 2002; Giray & Ceren, 2021). It is precisely this which Bigo classifies as the driving securitizing agent of migration – not mere speech acts but everyday practices, policies, and surveillance technologies (Giray & Ceren, 2021). The causal relationship between the proliferating technologies and the securitarian discourse on migration, in the sense of which came first, is outside the scope of this work; however, what is important is the linkage between the two and how this dynamic plays out in the EU’s approach to migrants and asylum seekers, increasingly seen as test subjects of the continuously evolving border management system.

At this stage, it is likely that both poles, discursive practices and speech acts, on the one hand, and technocratic projects legitimizing themselves through their missions and budgets, on the other, are driving the securitization of migration as such. In the case of the latter, it is relevant to ask whether technological capabilities are only subsequently legitimized through political decisions, or whether there was an objective need for such. As Giray and Ceren (2021) argue, most of the EU’s border management systems were indeed devised as a solution before the problem, with such being presented as data management and processing tools, taking a turn towards intelligence and investigative roles. If not so, the necessity for such a turn can always be legitimized through politicians’ speech acts, often invoking

criminalization into discussions over (im)migration. In fact, studies confirm that migrants are ever so linked to criminality, insecurity, and even terrorism; thereby, through such discourses, measures are justified against them (Bigo & Guild, 2019).

Therefore, today, we are talking about digital borders (Broeders, 2011). Yet, it is not proven that increased usage of high-tech surveillance leads to better outcomes in terms of preventing illegal migration and border crossings (Schöll et al., 2024). The question is whether the utilization of such and other technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), within border management even has the potential to effectively yield expected results however those may be framed. The EU's most recent adaptation of an already securitized border regime, the Entry/Exit System (EES), represents the en masse production of durable administrative categories sorting mobility into prescribed labels: compliance, suspicion, and risk. These categories operationalize securitization by embedding it in data fields, automated checks, and interoperability standards, ensuring that (incommensurate) scrutiny is routinized rather than coincidental. Therefore, the concern over its deployment lies not in the overt declarations of danger vis-à-vis its subjects, but in the routinization of categorizations authorizing scrutiny, restriction, and exclusion.

Additionally, concerns over harm to data and right to privacy and private life, as well as unjustifiable and disproportional data collection, are rising, as the expansion of border management through technology presents itself as a testing ground where subjects are inherently human and unprotected (Napieralski, 2019; Schöll et al., 2024). As long as the argument that one citizen's security and humanity are more important and bigger than the others' stands, discourses of labeling and securitization, aided by technology, will thrive. Taken together, the EU's new entry and exit system is, at its core, categorization as securitization in technical form. It has rendered territorial borders into distributed classification systems where (im)migrants are seen as risk profiles, ultimately determined by the Panopticon's extraterritorialization of surveillance.

These examples suggest that the social consequences of categorizations are ultimately decided by how human actors deploy them. While the example of racial categorization in the U.S. shows its arbitrariness and utility as resources for domination, categorizations now route access to territory, asylum, and the legality of travel; yet, they

may serve as a tool for sharing power and repairing harm. The same boxes that deliver parity can freeze differences and be repurposed to police and exclude.

Evidently, categories can be necessary in some cases, for power-sharing or repairing harm. To make them serve equality rather than control, they should be used carefully and on a small scale. Careful use means relying on self-identification, allowing multiple or no entries, and offering a safe decline option. It also means linking benefits and protections to qualifications, needs, or harms ahead of group membership. Handled this way, categories are less likely to emerge as tools of securitization and more likely to support targeted repair while still leaving space for individuality.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This article has treated race as a source of power rather than a fact of nature. Throughout U.S. history, layered authorities designed and revised tests for belonging and carried those tests into schools, courts, ledgers, and later into forms and databases. As statutes faded, the work moved into records and proxies that route access, attention, and sanction without naming race. Repetition through paperwork made the categories feel natural and also shaped how people understood themselves and one another.

The contemporary scene follows from that history. Seen in this way, categorization is linked to securitization not only in moments of emergency but in those routinized, persistent profilings and labelings which endure through maps, metrics, and territorial borders. Apparent progress can reflect a change in boxes rather than a change on the ground. The politics sits not only in the legislation or rules but in the category regime: who sets the boxes, what counts as a stop or a claim, which fields are required, and how missing data and proxies are handled. Those design choices decide who is protected, who is exposed, and which stories carry force in offices.

The lesson travels beyond the United States. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and its neighbors, identity labels securitize people and places, control job access, and enact power hierarchies. At its borders, an erect digital border is being strengthened, propelling this logic over into the governance of mobility. Here, securitization is enacted through routine collection and management of (biometric) data and the interoperability of records.

Lastly, this article does not argue against categorizations as such. Categories can also be used to share power or repair harm, but only when they are narrowly tailored, transparent, and open to appeal and scrutiny, as well as when space remains for civic self-identification and for individuals who do not fit the official menu. On the other hand, categories harden, take on an implicit role, operating by unchecked proxies, securitizing by default.

The practical task, then, is to render categories into visible sites of governance. Precise questions need to be asked: which evidence is used, where proxies enter, who is elevated, and who is relegated. Centering these mechanics shows why “race blind” or “neutral” systems continue to reproduce racialized and securitized outcomes, the understanding of which is essential to any viable effort at desecuritization and equality.

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