

Myth buster: Exposing the mythical origins of racism

One author's perspective on how some Americans, including Thomas Jefferson, created the concept of race

BY JIM DOUGLAS
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Jacqueline Jones teaches at the University of Texas and has been awarded a MacArthur "genius" fellowship and other prizes. She's an intellectual heavyweight, who specializes in African-American history, particularly as it relates to labor. I suspect that historians will conclude that her book is very important.

Being married to an academic historian, I should have known what to expect. Like academic histories in general, "A Dreadful Deceit" is based on exhaustive research and contains a myriad of specific facts, marshalled by the author to prove her hypothesis. For a reader not trained as a historian — even one interested in gaining a greater understanding of the history of race in the U.S. — this makes for a challenging read. It can be hard for many of us to extract the key points from the tremendous amount of detail concerning numerous people's lives and events. But Jones ultimately supports her thesis well.

Conquering the harmful divisions in our society based on race is critical to genuine social progress in 21st-century America. But to accomplish this requires an understanding of where these divisions originated.

"A Dreadful Deceit" uses the life stories of six people to illustrate the history of race in the U.S. The author's purpose is to contend with America's own "creation myth" that "the nation was conceived in 'racial' differences" and that, over time, "these self-evident differences have suffused our national character and shaped our national destiny."

Jones sees race as a myth. She writes "race itself is a fiction, one that has no basis in biology or any long-standing, consistent usage in human culture." Instead, racial divisions have been the result of "complex historical processes" that have little to do with biology and everything to do with power relations and the needs of the political elite at the time. It is a provocative hypothesis for those who may believe that racism goes back to the arrival of the first slaves from Africa.

Even though enslaved Africans were in English North America as early as 1619, until the American Revolution slavery existed without any stated basis in race. Only the powerful and well-to-do could afford

to own slaves, and they had no reason or need to justify slavery based on any notion of race or racial inferiority. They simply needed slave labor to maintain their "luxurious way of life."

Jones explains that Africans experienced "extreme political vulnerability" to enslavement because they had no nation-states to protect them and little ability to resist their capture and bondage. The difference in power between Europeans and Africans created what, perhaps on the surface, appeared to be a relationship based on race. To Jones, however, it was "local political economies and labor demands shaped by military imperatives — not racial prejudices — [that] account for the origins of slavery in the colonies" and the eventual predominance of African descendants in the slave population.

Antonio was an "Angolan" in Maryland who resisted how he was treated. In 1658, he had been a slave for about six months when his Dutch owner, one of the most powerful men in the colony, beat him and left him to die. Perhaps surprisingly, Antonio's owner was later prosecuted (although not convicted). The key to Jones' analysis is that, in telling the story, none of the participants in the trial referred to any racial characteristics or appeared to hold any prejudice based on race.

Up until the time of the revolution, "neither ethnicity nor skin color correlated precisely with a specific legal status." Southern planters and others "stereotyped Africans according to their tribal origins but refrained from attaching any racial characteristics to Africans and their descendants." Slaveholders did not talk in terms of race or use it as a reason to justify slavery. Both pro- and anti-British camps offered slaves freedom in return for fighting with them.

After the Revolutionary War, Thomas Jefferson, "architect of the nation's conception of liberty and a slaveholder himself," and other thinkers and political leaders set out to develop the principles upon which the republic would be founded. It was only then that a theory of social difference, positing "black intellectual inferiority," was necessary to "rationalize black exclusion from the body politic of the new nation." It was in this context, Jones theorizes, that Jefferson and others

developed theories for the first time that black people were inferior, "less intelligent and imaginative" than white people. In one sense it was simple: for political reasons related to potential political power in the Southern colonies, it was important that slaves not be given the same rights as free people, especially the right to vote.

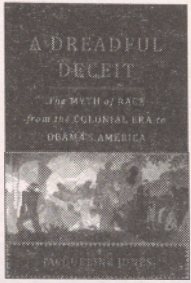
Thus, the myth of racial inferiority was born said Jones. In addition to Antonio, Jones uses five other examples, stretching from Boston King, a black fugitive in revolutionary South Carolina, to Marxist Simon Owens, who battled both the auto industry and the United Auto Workers to address the specific needs of black workers. The different examples over time show that the myth of racial differences is flexible, varies by time and place and can include contradictory ideas. In the early 1900s many Southern whites believed that black people were lazy and not capable of learning, yet also believed black people should do the hard work in the fields and passed legislation to prevent them from going to school, which implied their desire to become educated.

The precise origins of American racism or whether race is a myth, can suggest the strategy for change.

An epilogue brings her analysis to the current day. She cites numerous examples proving that a "post-racial society" didn't follow Obama's election: There are disparate rates of poverty, educational attainment and incarceration; the Great Recession had a disproportionate impact on rates of foreclosure and loss of accumulated wealth; and government cutbacks and resulting layoffs have had a lopsided impact on people of color. And, much like the way legislative actions were used to hinder black people's right to vote after both the revolutionary and civil wars, the onslaught of voter ID laws seeks to have the same effect today.

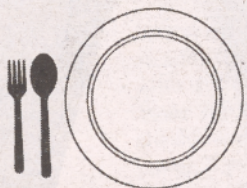
Jones concludes that even though mythologies of racial difference have largely disappeared from public discourse, "centuries of violent discrimination against people of African descent" have "deeply scarred and twisted fundamental structures of American life." Her analysis seems to describe the current situation very well.

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A Dreadful Deceit: The Myth of Race from the Colonial Era to Obama's America by Jacqueline Jones

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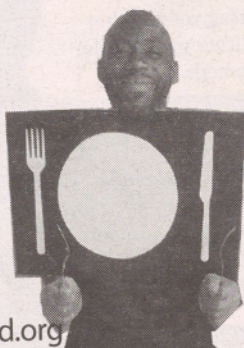
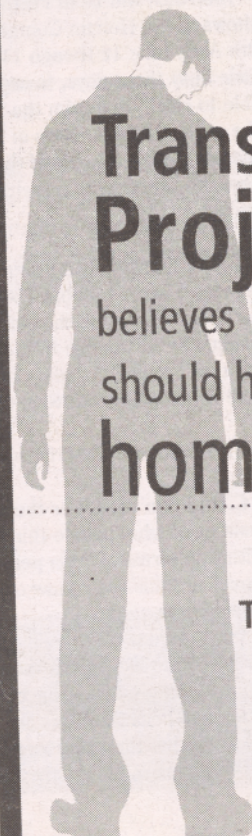
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