

## Who Is Equal?

### Reading 2

The previous reading focused on how the great thinkers of the Enlightenment viewed equality and difference. Their ideas helped shape the way ordinary people viewed the world. Ideas are also shaped by the experiences of everyday life. Jack Foley traces the development of the notion that Europeans are white to the growth of slavery in the British colonies:

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first appearance in print of the word white meaning "a white man, a person of a race distinguished by a light complexion" was in 1671. The second was in 1726: "There may be about 20,000 Whites [or I should say Portuguese, for they are none of the whitest] and about treble that number of Slaves." The term Caucasian is even later: "Of or belonging to the region of the Caucasus; a name given by [Johann] Blumenboch [ca. 1800] to the 'white' race of mankind, which he derived from this region."

"Through the centuries of the slave trade," writes Earl Conrad, in his interesting book, *The Invention of the Negro*, "the word race was rarely if ever used. . . . [William] Shakespeare's *Othello* uses the word tribe, nation, but not race. The Moor in *Othello* calls himself black and the word slave is several times used, but not race. The word does not appear in the King James Version of the Bible in any context other than as running a race. The Bible refers to nations and says: 'God made the world and all things therein; and hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.' The Bible, with all its violence and its incessant warfare between peoples, does not have racist references to tribes, groups, provinces, nations, or men."

And again, on the subject of slavery: "The traffic grew with the profits—the shuttle service importing human chattel to America in overcrowded ships. It was on these ships that we find the beginning—the first crystallizations—of the curious doctrine which was to be called 'white supremacy.' Among the first white men to develop attitudes of supremacy were the slave ship crews."<sup>2</sup>

Colonial charters and other official documents written in the 1600s and early 1700s rarely refer to British colonists as white. By the late 1700s, however, the word was widely used in public documents and private papers. According to

scholar Leon Higginbotham, Jr., it was also becoming entwined with the idea of citizenship. Increasingly, states viewed a citizen as a man who could help his neighbors put down slave rebellions or fight a war against the Indians. That notion of citizenship was reflected in the Naturalization Act of 1790. It states:

All free white persons who, have, or shall, migrate into the United States, and shall give satisfactory proof before a magistrate, by oath, that they intend to reside therein, and shall take an oath of allegiance, and shall have resided in the United States for one whole year, shall be entitled to the rights of citizenship.

Before the law was passed, members of Congress argued over the one-year requirement, wondered whether Jews and Catholics should be eligible for citizenship, and considered restrictions on the right of immigrants to hold political office. But no member publicly questioned the idea of limiting citizenship to only "free white persons."

Three years before the bill became law, Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, observed in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, "It will probably be asked, Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state?" In response to that question, he advanced "as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances are inferior to whites in the endowments both of body and mind." He called for "scientific investigations" but urged that researchers use caution "where our conclusion would degrade a whole race of men from the rank in the scale of beings which their Creator may perhaps have given them."<sup>3</sup>

Jefferson voiced his suspicions at a time when a growing number of Americans were urging that slavery be abolished. Their opposition was based in part on the ideas that Jefferson himself expressed in the Declaration of Independence. In response to his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, these abolitionists charged, "You have degraded the blacks from the rank which God hath given them in the scale of being! You have advanced the strongest argument for their state of slavery! You have insulted human nature!"

Some abolitionists offered Jefferson proof that people of African descent are equal to whites by citing the achievements of individuals like Benjamin Banneker, a free black from Maryland. The Georgetown (VA) *Weekly Ledger* described him in 1791 as "an Ethiopian whose abilities as surveyor and astronomer already prove that Mr. Jefferson's concluding that that race of men were void of mental endowment was without foundation."

Between 1791 and 1796, Banneker produced a series of almanacs—calendars containing weather forecasts, astronomical information, and other useful facts.

In the introduction to Banneker's first almanac, James McHenry, a prominent soldier and statesman, offered readers his personal assurance that Banneker had performed without assistance all of the mathematical calculations in the book. "I consider this Negro as fresh proof that the powers of the mind are disconnected with the color of the skin, or in other words, a striking contradiction to [the] doctrine that 'the Negroes are naturally inferior to the whites and unsusceptible of attainments in arts and sciences.'"

Shortly before publication, Banneker sent a hand-written copy of his almanac to Jefferson with a letter offering the book as evidence of what an individual of African descent could accomplish. In reply, Jefferson wrote, "Nobody wishes more than I do to see proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren, talents equal to those of the other colors of men, and that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa and America."

Although Jefferson expressed admiration for Banneker's achievements, he continued to believe that blacks were inferior to whites. Nor did Banneker's almanac alter the way a growing number of other white Americans viewed people of African descent. By the early 1800s, even white Americans opposed to slavery increasingly regarded Africans as members of a separate and inferior race.

## CONNECTIONS

How was *race* defined in Chapter 1? How is it defined in this reading? How do dictionaries define the term? What do you think it means to people in the United States today? What does it mean to you? How are these various definitions related to the word *equal*?

By the 1790s, slavery had existed in North America for nearly 200 years. How do you think the existence of slavery shaped the way Americans defined equality? Viewed *race*?

Jack Foley writes, "The only way for the 'majority' to conceive itself as a majority is to conceive of itself as white: without whiteness, there are only 'minorities.'" How does he seem to define "whiteness"? How do you define the term?

Every community has a "universe of obligation"—the name Helen Fein has given to the circle of individuals and groups "toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for [amends]."<sup>4</sup> Who was part of the nation's "universe of obligation" in the early years of the Republic? Who was excluded? What part did *race* play in definitions of citizenship?

How do you account for Jefferson's refusal to accept Banneker's accomplishments as proof of the abilities of African Americans? In your experience, what opinions are relatively easy to change? What opinions or impressions are more difficult to alter? What sorts of proof are most persuasive—personal experiences, the lessons of history, scholarly endorsements, philosophical arguments, scientific evidence—in changing an impression? Revising a stereotype? Altering a point of view?

Thomas Jefferson considered slavery immoral. Yet he was a slaveholder who saw Africans as a threat to "white racial purity." In reflecting on efforts to free the slaves, he wrote, "This unfortunate difference in color, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people." Despite such beliefs, Jefferson inspired generations of African Americans. In a speech, civil rights activist Julian Bond tried to explain why:

Martin Luther King didn't care whether the . . . author of the Declaration of Independence thought he was inferior. The man may have thought so, but his words belied the thought. For King and his audience, the significant Thomas Jefferson was not the Ambassador to France or the Secretary of State, the former or the slaveholder, as did Jefferson, they thought his chief virtue was as author of the Declaration of Independence, specifically of those self-evident truths that all are created equal. The promise of the words—for King, for those before him and us—became the true measure of the man.<sup>5</sup>

What is Bond suggesting about the power of ideas to spark the imagination and inspire creativity? Are Jefferson's most famous words the "true measure of the man" or should he be judged by his deeds? Why do you think some historians have called Jefferson's views paradoxical? To what extent did he seem to be aware of contradictions in his thinking? How did he try to resolve them?

1. The word *Negro* was commonly used in earlier centuries to refer to individuals of African descent. Its use reflects a particular time period.  
2. "Multiculturalism and the Media" by Jack Foley in *Multicultural Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Wars*, edited by Ishmael Reed, Viking, 1997, pp. 367–369.  
3. *Notes on the State of Virginia* by Thomas Jefferson, edited by William Peden, University of North Carolina Press, 1982, p. 143.  
4. *Accounting for Genocide* by Helen Fein, Free Press, 1979, p. 4.  
5. "Address" by Julian Bond, Jefferson Conference, October 16, 1992, pp. 19–20.