

## RACE—The Story We Tell

Episode 2 of *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/race>):

### Highlights

- The concept of race is a recent invention, only a few hundred years old and is deeply tied to the development of the U.S.
- When the American colonies needed labor, they turned to the slave trade. Africans made good slaves because they knew how to farm and could be easily identified if they escaped.
- When Thomas Jefferson penned, “All men are created equal,” Americans had to justify how they could still hold slaves. Jefferson was the first American public figure to speculate on the “natural” inferiority of Africans.
- Jefferson believed the Native Americans were similar to Europeans. The government first sought to “civilize” them. Then because of the pressure for more land, Andrew Jackson forced the Cherokees west (Trail of Tears, 1831).
- Eight years later we went to war with Mexico to get more land. People argued that Mexicans were an inferior mongrel race. The west belonged to white Americans.
- Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century “science” sought to prove the distinction of the races and the natural “superiority” of the white Europeans.
- By mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, race was accepted as “common sense.” The idea found fruition in racial science, Manifest Destiny, and our imperial actions abroad.

### Discussion Questions

- What did you learn about the history of race in America that you did not know before?
- How is our society still justifying the treatment of people of color?
- How does racism benefit white people today? How are the lives of white people today better or easier than the lives of people of color?
- Compare current responses to racial inequity—e.g., calls for reparations or affirmative action—with the response of those who believed in the “White Man’s Burden.” Is it possible to address racial inequities without reinforcing biological notions of race? If so, how?

### Supplemental Activities

- Read this Smithsonian article on anti-black violence and inequality in the United States <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/158-resources-understanding-systemic-racism-america-180975029/>
- Take a virtual museum tour of the National Museum of African American History and Culture <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/national-museum-african-american-history-and-culture-interactive-museum-tour/>