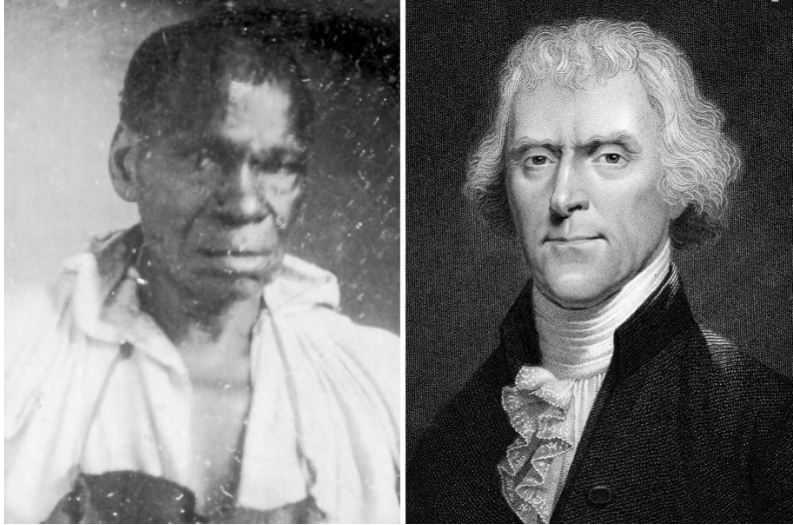


‘Slavery bounded his life’: Thomas Jefferson’s views on race – in his own words

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A new book by historian Annette Gordon-Reed explores the former US president’s writings on race throughout his life

Thomas Jefferson’s interactions with enslaved people bookend his life. The third US president and a founder of the United States was born into a slave-owning family in a society upon which slavery was the bedrock. A Black woman was probably his earliest nursemaid – evidence shows that his mother did not breastfeed her children, so it is probable that a Black woman was also Jefferson’s wet nurse. His earliest memory, which he relayed to his grandchildren, was of being carried on a pillow via horseback by a man his family enslaved on a 50-mile journey to Tuckahoe, Virginia.

Given his status as an enslaver – Jefferson owned more than 610 people in his lifetime – those he held in bondage may have been the last people Jefferson saw before he died. An enslaved man, John Hemmings, built his casket. The omnipresence of slavery in his life and its clear contradictions with regards to his views on liberty, create a point of which much of the existing literature on Jefferson must attempt to make sense. Scholars have long tried to analyze and parse the juxtaposition of

bondage and freedom for the former president. But in a new book by Annette Gordon-Reed, a Pulitzer prize-winning historian and a pre-eminent Jefferson scholar, Jefferson speaks for himself.

Jefferson on Race: A Reader is a collection of Jefferson's own writings, both personal and public, on race. The Guardian spoke with Gordon-Reed about Jefferson's life and her findings. This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Considering everything written on Jefferson, including your previous books about him, what do you think letting Jefferson speak for himself in your newest work adds to the canon about him?

Well, it gives people as complete a picture as possible of race as it was lived in his time. The way he lived it, to look at different moments, things that are unconscious. When he's consciously writing about race, things kind of jump out at you as you're reading them. I just wanted a total picture of how he dealt with people of color – not just Black people, because we talk about Native Americans, as well, but his dealings with non-white people over the course of his life.

Jefferson is known for his contradictions – specifically regarding race and freedom. He wrote that all men are born free, but he also enslaved hundreds. What was most illuminating to you in his thinking on the subject?

What's illuminating to me is that he, like most people, maybe, thought that he was a good person. He saw himself as a liberal or progressive – he wouldn't have used the term progressive, that's a modern term. But that he would be liberal on the question of slavery, certainly, and on the question of race. He talked about other people's prejudices as if he didn't have those same prejudices. I can't say he wasn't self-aware, just because it was such a different time, but I think modern readers looking at this will say: 'Well, on one hand, here he is saying this thing, but his actions are separate,' just as you're pointing out. But it [also] worked in the opposite direction. You would think that there would be situations where he would be more hostile to African American people, and he wasn't. Or he would be more condescending, and he wasn't, based on some of the other stuff he said. Like everybody, it's a jumble. He has some attitudes that show themselves in one setting and in a different way in a separate setting. The contradiction that you noted is very much present here. But the one consistent thing I think is him thinking of himself as a progressive person who was more enlightened than his fellow Virginians.

Was he singular, specifically among the founders or other enslavers of his day, with regards to his contradictions there?

I don't think he was singular, it's just that he wrote things down. He thought lots about it. It's always a peril, you know, to write things down. He thought about the future of the United States in a very, very extensive, expansive way. It's not just he thought about what would happen as the decades unfolded. He foresaw some problems that others did not, for example, racial conflict. He didn't think that there could be a multiracial society that was without conflict. He saw potential conflict if there was an emancipation and Black people remained in the United States, white people and Black

people would always be at each other's throats, essentially. I'm not so sure that Washington or Madison or Alexander Hamilton were thinking in those terms. They weren't. I don't see the evidence that they were thinking of the United States 100 years or 200 years, 300 years from their time period – on the question of race, at least. So he's talking about things that we're very interested in now, while the other founders were not to the same extent.

America is celebrating 250 years as a nation this year. What do you think he would make of America today? How do you think his vision for America squares with where we are today?

Some things he would love and some things he would not love. I mean, certainly, the scientific capabilities of America. He would be horrified at what's going on right now, where we seem to be trying to dismantle the scientific capabilities of the country. He saw the world, in many ways, through science, and that goes along with this notion of progress. There would be new discoveries, new medicines. That's what the Enlightenment would bring, constant progress. So I think he would be amazed and very happy at the scientific progress that the United States has made over the years. I don't know that he would be so thrilled about the gender business because his understanding about the place of women was more set than even his understanding about race. There was sort of a natural order and women were supposed to be in the domestic sphere. They were not supposed to be governors and soldiers. That would baffle him. The African American thing would probably be – since he believed in the people – if he thought that the majority of people wanted to try to incorporate African American people into society, that would be fine by him. But the main thing is he would be enormously pleased at the United States's position as a leader in technology and science.

I'm stuck on him wanting to be remembered progressively on the issue of slavery while keeping many, including his own children, in bondage. I think that's something contemporary audiences will struggle with. How do you make those two things fit?

I don't know that they do fit. People can know something is wrong or that they're not living up to a certain ideal and they're not emotionally capable of doing what is right. I think slavery bounded his life from the beginning to the very end. His whole way of life depended upon that. There's no question in my mind that he knew that was wrong, but he did not have the strength to do anything about it in his own time. He made some effort as a young legislator and was rebuffed pretty decisively. Then he went on to other things he was interested in. He helped to found a country and he figured – we've had this revolution, we've created this new government. That was what really obsessed him. He thought that slavery would solve itself, that, over time, more and more people would come to see that it was a wrong system. But he was not about to do what it would take to get rid of slavery, which was to have a war. After having created the United States of America, he would not be able to bear the thought of the dissolution of the union because of slavery. He was fixated on the United States of America as the crowning achievement of his life. The next generations of people would end slavery, just as they did the revolution. That's not satisfactory to me or to us, but I really think that's what his thinking was.

Was there anything that surprised you about Jefferson's own thoughts on race?

I was surprised by some of the interactions that he had with African American people over the course of the years, sort of informal. There was more than I had realized. A person he hired to look after his property, an African American man, that he paid to make sure that no trespassers were on them and that the taxes were paid regularly. He had more dealings with African American people who were not enslaved than I knew anything about. I was surprised by the character of the dealings, that they were more normal – respectful is not the word I mean. But you wouldn't have known that the person was a person of color, if [the writings] hadn't said they were.

Was there anything that didn't make it into the collection that you think was illuminating or that you wish you could have gotten in there?

Yeah, this is a sore point for me. The one that was obvious, and it wasn't until everything had been typeset and put that I went: 'Oh my God, I didn't have the Northwest Ordinance.' He drafted the Northwest Ordinance of 1784, which was designed to give a plan for how new states, how new territory would come into the union after the 13 colonies. One of the provisions was to prevent the spread of slavery. He basically outlawed slavery in the north-west territory. That provision was rewritten into the Northwest Ordinance in 1787, but they kept that suggestion that there wouldn't be slavery there in the new territories. There were some exceptions, but the basic principle is that it was supposed to be a free territory. That should definitely have been in there.

