Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and the Question of Race: An Ongoing Debate

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Not many private relationships in history have received as much press attention in recent years as that between Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings. First alleged in 1802 by the journalist James Callender, who based his account on stories that had been current in Virginia for some years, the affair has since then been debated both in the scholarly community and by the general public to an unparalleled degree. The results of the DNA tests on male descendants of the Jefferson and Hemings families that were published in 1998 have added fuel to the debate. Meanwhile, its focus has shifted. The majority of those who have publicly expressed an opinion on the case, including the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation which owns and administers Monticello, now seem to agree that a sexual relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings did exist, and that it resulted in a number of children. The questions addressed today primarily concern the implications of the affair. What does the liaison between Jefferson and Sally Hemings mean for our understanding of the man Thomas Jefferson, and how does it

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affect the accomplishments he has generally been credited with? Given the little we know about her, how do we view Sally Hemings’s role in the relationship, and how do we come to understand her as an individual living out her life in bondage? What, if any, are the consequences the affair has for an evaluation of interracial relationships as they existed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? Finally, does the story and the way in which it has been transmitted have any bearing on the problem of race as it is perceived today?

The DNA tests have had an extraordinary echo both in the media and in the scholarly profession. Once again, to use Merrill Peterson’s words, Jefferson has turned out to be “a sensitive reflector … of America’s troubled search for the image of itself.”3 Judging from what not a few commentators have said, there is widespread hope that the recent revelations will give rise to a new and more fluid concept of racial relations in the United States. Others, wary of the motives of those who have allegedly “pushed” the news, suspect that the case is being used to put Jefferson in the service of “identity politics” and to detract from his status as a public figure. My purpose in the following is to review the response the story of Jefferson’s and Hemings’s relationship has had in recent years both in the media and among historians. My summary is concerned above all with the way in which the debate has dealt with the issue of race. Before looking at some of the comments the results of the DNA tests have elicited in the public press and among historians concerned with the topic, I will briefly consider the reception of two books that, each in its own way, anticipated what was to follow, Fawn Brodie’s *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974) and Annette Gordon-Reed’s *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1997).

The case Fawn Brodie made for a long-lasting, loving relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings is well known and need only be recapitulated here in the most summary fashion. *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* suggests that Jefferson fell in love with Sally on the rebound of his romance with Maria Cosway, about half a year after Sally, then aged between 14 and 15, arrived in Paris, where she had accompanied Jefferson’s young daughter Maria. One of the few scholars at the time to give credence to the memoir of Sally’s son Madison Hemings published in the *Pike County (Ohio) Republican* in 1873, Brodie assumes that Jefferson was the father of Sally’s children, that he suffered from pangs of guilt throughout his life, but could not bring himself to acknowledge his relationship with a black slave either publicly or

within the circle of his family. His love for Sally surfaces indirectly, however, in covert gestures and occasional slips of his pen.

While the reviews of *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* in professional journals were mixed, often condescending, at times even abusive, many readers apparently accepted what Brodie said. Her book was a main selection for the Book-of-the-Month Club, stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for thirteen weeks, sold 80,000 copies in hardback and, by the time of the author’s death in 1980, had sold more than a quarter of a million copies in paperback. It is still one of the most popular biographies of Jefferson in print; Merrill Peterson in the preface to a new edition of his *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* somewhat grudgingly concedes that “no book of the last quarter century has left a more indelible mark on the Jefferson image than Fawn Brodie’s.” The reviewers who objected to it argued that not only did Brodie’s thesis rest on shaky evidence, but that her portrait of Jefferson and his purported loving relationship with Sally conformed neither with what was generally held to be Jefferson’s “character” nor with the circumstances stipulated by the master–slave relationship. Such objections notwithstanding, the long-term significance of Brodie’s biography no doubt was that for once an author took the memoir of Madison Hemings seriously and accepted the fact that Jefferson was the father of Sally Hemings’s children. In setting such a precedent, Brodie, as Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers have said, clearly “reflected a changing attitude toward the American past and the people who shaped it.”

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5 Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, IX.

6 For an elaborate defense of Jefferson’s “character,” see especially Virginius Dabney, *The Jefferson Scandals* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1981). In view of the reputation Fawn Brodie’s book was to acquire in later years, it is interesting to note that some of the early reviews that appeared in professional journals did not find a relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings as unlikely as was often claimed at a later date. Thus Lois W. Banner accepted such a relationship as at least “plausible” (*American Historical Review*, 80: 5 [Dec. 1975], 1392); Bruce Mazlish conceded that Brodie’s “conclusion may ... be right” (*Journal of American History*, 61: 4 [Mar. 1975], 1090); and Winthrop D. Jordan held “that it is quite probable ... that Jefferson was the biological father of Sally Hemings’s children” (*William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 32: 3 [July 1975], 512). Cf. also Jordan’s remark in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 55: 2 (1998) that on reading Brodie he believed “that the essential story was correct as to fact” (317).

More than two decades later, Annette Gordon-Reed took the debate over Jefferson’s affair with Sally Hemings a significant step further. Rather than trying to provide new evidence about the affair itself, her object was to question the historical perspective from which the relationship has been viewed in the past and, as she sees it, from which it widely continues to be viewed today. Her conclusion, for many, is painful. The historical profession, she argues, has continuously employed a double standard in dealing with the affair, has virtually silenced all black voices involved in it, and, worse, has consistently dehumanized Sally Hemings and her family. She considers the neglect of evidence supplied by black sources typical not only of professional historians belonging to the white majority, but of the white majority in the United States as a whole — hence the suggestion in her subtitle that she is dealing with an *American* controversy. The faults and oversights she points to as she sifts through the arguments exchanged in the past are devastating. The case she makes, almost in passing, for Jefferson’s paternity is hard to refute.

Given the issue at stake, it was perhaps to be expected that Gordon-Reed would be accused of “playing the race card.”\(^8\) In a way, she does – her book, after all, *is* about race and about how racial prejudices color our perceptions. Some historians have felt the sting and have lashed back at her, pointing out omissions and errors of fact, but in general reviewers have tended to concede the point she is trying to make.\(^9\) “Her accomplishment is to shift the focus of inquiry from the Jefferson family to the Hemings family,” one of them said; another adds that “she seeks to find the voices of Sally Hemings and her children; to weigh their lives on an even scale with those of Jefferson, his family, and his supporters.”\(^10\) One reviewer pointedly expressed what is at stake: “The historian in me wanted Gordon-Reed to acknowledge the difficulty for historians of challenging received wisdom. Doing original work

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a succinct summary of the controversy between Brodie and prominent members of the so-called “Jefferson Establishment”; see 427–34.


as a historian[,] including shaking off unfounded assumptions that contain unscrutinized racial, sexual, and class stereotypes, requires a certain amount of unlearning of the material one has been trained to master and on which one is expected to build.”\(^\text{11}\) As we shall see, in this particular case the general public evidently needed little time to accomplish the process of “unlearning.” Neither did most historians.

When news broke about the DNA tests in November 1998, Gordon-Reed could note with legitimate pride that “historians need not have ceded the question to scientific investigators. A more disciplined, rigorous and less prejudiced application of historical method could have yielded the same answer.”\(^\text{12}\) The enormous public response to the results of the DNA tests demonstrates that she had also been right in her claim that the controversy over Jefferson and Hemings had always been more than a debate among historians, that indeed it was and continues to be an American controversy. Two new television films based on the story have been produced and aired since 1998, and by February 1999, as Lucia Stanton, Senior Research Historian at Monticello, remarked half-jokingly, the 750 words of the original essay in *Nature* had already generated something like 750,000 words in articles and comments in the printed media across the country.\(^\text{13}\)

Leaving aside the insinuations about possible political motives in the timing of the tests and the frequent allusions to the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal, commentators in general have focused on three aspects of the affair: the “status” of Thomas Jefferson as a political icon, the nature of the relationship in question, and, foremost in terms of editorial space and weight, the implications the story is thought to have for our understanding of the problems of race in the past, the present, and, possibly, the future. Similar issues were addressed at various scholarly conferences devoted to the topic. I will first review the comments that appeared in the press after the results of the DNA tests were published, then consider some of the responses the story has had in the historical profession.

Echoing Gordon-Reed, a large group of comments in the press revolve around the idea that “the black historical consciousness” has always accepted the story of the Jefferson–Hemings relationship, while whites have tended to ignore or deny it. The image of two “parallel universes of thought” on the matter, one white, one black, was frequently evoked; the statement,

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\(^{11}\) Kathleen M. Brown, *American Historical Review*, 104: 3 (June 1999), 900–2, 902.


\(^{13}\) Lucia Stanton, quoted in the Charlottesville (VA) *Daily Progress*, 2 Feb. 1999.
“We black folk always knew,” reverberates in various forms through many articles and letters-to-the-editor. If you grow up African American in this country, you become accustomed to reading history that leaves out so many critical facts, many of which are related to your own history,” a reader said in a letter to the New York Times. His remarks echo an earlier letter, in which a white reader complained about the fact that he learned about “America’s (and Thomas Jefferson’s) defining paradox – the rhetoric of freedom amid the reality of slavery … only in the most antiseptic way,” adding that he welcomed the opportunity the affair provides “to recognize the towering importance of the African American account of American history in our children’s education.”

In particular, many commentators maintain, it is the institution of slavery that needs to be reconsidered. “The stubborn refusal to acknowledge the truth of Jefferson’s cross-racial relationship amounts to a continuation of a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ to cover up the meaning of slavery and the politics of whiteness,” a black journalist wrote in the Minneapolis Star Tribune. Similarly, Dan Rather, the CBS anchorman, argued that “two hundred years after Jefferson many of the underpinnings of slavery haunt us still. They are the foundation for too much of our society.” In this context, writers often raised the question of the nature of the Jefferson–Hemings relationship. For the syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman, “there is no evidence that Jefferson and Hemings were Tom and Sally, that they transcended the master and slave relationship and became loving companions.” Others bluntly assert that “the practice of miscegenation … in most cases would be better defined


as the brutal rape of slaves by their slave masters.”17 In the CBS movie Sally Hemings: An American Scandal, on the other hand, first aired in February 2000, the relationship is presented in highly romantic terms, and Sally Hemings actually portrayed as the initiator of the liaison. While the Washington Post commented that this “historical interpretation borders on the egregious,” other reviews were less severe in their judgment.18 The documentary Sally Hemings, produced for the A&E “Biography” series and first shown in October 2000, withholding judgment on the nature of the affair. Relying to a large extent on commentary provided by historians such as Dianne Swann-Wright, Lucia Stanton, and Beverly Gray, it seeks to allow room for Sally as a presence of her own in Jefferson’s life, without necessarily defining the nature of this presence on the one hand, or whitewashing the institution of slavery (or Jefferson’s character) on the other. A similarly careful attempt not to rush to conclusions and at least not rule out the possibility of a certain amount of affectionateness between Hemings and Jefferson characterizes Laura B. Randolph’s article, “Who Was Sally Hemings?” in the magazine Ebony.19

Numerous comments touch upon the notion of “family” involved in the Jefferson–Hemings affair. As most of those who submitted to the DNA tests were members of large and active family networks, the issue of familial relationships for many was of vital importance. Almost immediately after the publication of the test results, a widely publicized dispute arose over the question whether or not the Jefferson–Hemings descendants should have the right to be buried in the Monticello graveyard. Hitherto this right had been reserved for members of the Monticello Association, a group whose members claim descent from Jefferson through his daughters Martha and Maria. When a prominent member of this organization announced on the Oprah Winfrey show in November 1998 that he would invite his “black

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner at Monticello?” relating it to a favorite item of American popular culture.²⁰ A photograph of black and white Jefferson and Hemings descendants on the steps of Monticello, often accompanied by the report that the question of future membership in the Association for the time being remained unresolved, appeared in newspapers around the world.²¹ The controversy increased when a reporter for USA Today identified the possible site of the house in Charlottesville in which Sally Hemings had lived after Jefferson’s death and in the yard of which she may have been buried. The contrast between the unmarked grave of the former slave beneath the parking lot of a newly constructed Hampton Inn, and the graveyard at Monticello reserved for Jefferson’s white descendants presented an emotionally charged issue.²²

Some of the “black cousins” involved were actually white, as not only Eston Hemings, the youngest son of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, together with his family had long ago passed into the white community, but some of Madison’s children had taken the same step.²³ Whether white or black, the claims of the Hemings descendants for “space at the Jefferson


family table” could not be ignored, nor did it help when the charge of racism levelled against the Association was answered with the quip, “We’re not racists. We’re snobs.” The New York Times admonished the white branch of the family to solve its squabbles: “What the family does will have symbolic importance that extends well beyond the Virginia countryside. If white Jeffersons cannot reach out to the black people whose ancestors built Monticello – and especially to those who share the founder’s blood – then the prospects for harmony in this Jeffersonian Republic seem dimmer for us all.” The admonition evidently had little effect. At its meeting in Charlottesville in May 2002, the Monticello Association decided “to continue to restrict membership to Jefferson’s descendants through his daughters Martha and Maria.”

The idea of one Jefferson–Hemings family and the related images it suggests – the intertwined branches of the family tree, the mixed bloodlines, the rift in the family – were early on transferred to the racial situation in the United States as a whole. “Black Americans are not only integral to the American experience, we are also in the family,” one commentator noted; another expressed the belief that “if we can accept that, like the progeny of Jefferson, we may all be cousins, then maybe there’s hope for the end of racism.” Others used the metaphor yet more explicitly. “Distant though they may often seem, black Americans and white Americans are connected down to the bones,” a columnist said; an editorial for the Macon (GA) Telegraph, argued that “we are brothers and sisters in spiritual and physical terms. Many black and white families … are joined at the hip, literally.” Invoking the negative connotations of the “dysfunctional family,” the image was also used to warn against the dangers of racial divisiveness. The historian

24 The line made it into many newspapers. It is here quoted from “Jeffersons Split Over Hemings Descendants,” Washington Post, 17 May 1999.
Drew G. Faust in a letter to the *New York Times* pointed out that slaveowners, including Thomas Jefferson, had often referred to their “families white and black” in order to create an “image of slavery that defined them as kindly patriarchs,” but apparently her reminder went unheeded.\(^28\) Indeed there is no little irony in the fact that an image once used to mitigate the effects of “the peculiar institution” is now employed to evoke the idea of one national family. As such it continues to have wide currency. According to *USA Today*, Americans “are all Jefferson’s children.”\(^29\)

In a related set of comments, journalists expressed the view that the liaison between Jefferson and Sally Hemings may lead us to question the very idea of a racially based identity. “Racial distinctions that now seem etched in stone were fluid and hotly disputed in the slave-era South,” Brent Staples asserted in a *New York Times* editorial comment. “As the recipient of America’s first slaves, Virginia was first to encounter the confusions of miscegenation, which produced a class of people who were neither black nor white but could often live as either, depending on preference and the needs of the moment.” As he sees it, “the Hemings family was a forerunner in racial ambiguity.”\(^30\) Staples echoes the African American sociologist Orlando Patterson who argued in an earlier article in the *New York Times* that “knowing that the greatest of our Founding Fathers was a practicing miscegenist should energize the recent shift away from the either–or definition of race … toward a more blended and self-chosen definition of group identity.”\(^31\) In its announcement of the CBS miniseries, *US News & World Report* invited its readers to contemplate a picture of “America’s premier biracial couple.”\(^32\) Often the news about the affair was related to the unsuccessful attempt to persuade the Census Bureau to include a mixed-race category on the census forms or, more generally, to stories about the “browning” of America.\(^33\) On a lighter note, Max Frankel argued for “chromatical correctness,” suggesting that “the time has come to identify people as ebonics, chocolates, pinks or taupes.” “Unvarnished color consciousness,” he concludes, “requires that we abandon

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African American, Hispanic and Caucasian as anachronistic exaggerations or falsehoods.\textsuperscript{34}

But there were dissenting voices as well. The choice to be “just American” has never been left to those of African American descent, said Clarence Page, a black columnist for the \textit{Chicago Tribune}, and the \textit{Philadelphia Tribune} added that “while Blacks run panting behind Jefferson’s legacy in an effort to connect themselves to it,” white racism will persist.\textsuperscript{35} Others unambiguously took a separatist stand. The author of a letter to the editor of the \textit{Atlanta Journal} scoffed at those of the Hemings’s descendants who take pride in “their Jefferson bloodlines” and declared that he had “never wanted to be anything other than an African descendant.” A writer for the \textit{Baltimore City Paper} speaks of the bitterness with which many black families deny “kinship with their white antecedents” and approvingly quotes Ishmael Reed who described Jefferson as “America’s first deadbeat dad.” \textit{The Tribune}, an African American paper published in Jefferson’s Albemarle County, stated the case in simple and straightforward terms: “As for our white ancestors, we ignore their intrusion into our lives. … We do not hate, because we have learned to forgive, but we do not under any circumstances want to have any relationship with ‘our white cousins, the children of the slave master.’ … We have nothing in common, except an ancestor, one free and the other a slave.”\textsuperscript{36}

Will “whites, in possession of [Jefferson’s] legacy … continue to run as fast and as far from Blacks as possible,” as one paper charged?\textsuperscript{37} While not many of the newspaper comments I have read bear out such a charge, the accusation does not appear to be wholly unfounded when one considers the reaction shown by a particular group of white Jefferson descendants. Objecting specifically to the report issued by the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Herbert Barger, a “Jefferson family historian,” told the local newspaper in Charlottesville that “Jefferson, in his own town in Charlottesville, is being sold down the river for some personal agendas – historical revisionism and diversity.”\textsuperscript{38} Employed deliberately or not, the metaphor

\textsuperscript{37} “In Racism, the Truth can Hurt,” see note 35 above.
Jefferson–Hemings relationship has always been scrutinized by historians, genealogists, scientists, businesspeople, and patriots. The Jefferson–Hemings Myth: An American Tragedy. The president of the society, who identifies himself as a “lineal descendant of Thomas Jefferson,” in its foreword speaks of the need to correct the scholars “who have begun tearing down the reputation of Jefferson and focusing instead more broadly on the lives and the work done by Negro slaves, and on their contribution to the building of this nation.” These lives and contributions, he concludes, “are certainly worth of recognition, but this should not be done at the expense of the man who … ‘invented the United States of America.’”

Historians, as is their wont, have usually been more reserved in their evaluation of the Jefferson–Hemings relationship than most journalists. Nonetheless, as the conferences and publications devoted to the topic attest, the DNA revelations have strongly resonated among Jefferson scholars as well. Like the media, most historians now no longer seem to question the “truth” of the Jefferson–Hemings relationship; the questions raised almost invariably deal with the way we respond to such truth.

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40 Cf. the title of a conference held at the University of Richmond, VA, in April 2000: “Discovering and Dealing with Truth: The Thomas Jefferson/Sally Hemings Relationship, Its Interpretations, and the Implications of the Controversy That Surrounds It.” A notable exception to the general acceptance of the Jefferson–Hemings relationship is the “Report
An extraordinary, moving testimony to the impact of the story of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson on the scholarly community is a paper by Lucía Stanton and Dianne Swann-Wright, “Bonds of Memory: Identity and the Hemings Family.” Part of Monticello’s “Getting Word” project, an extended effort to collect the oral histories of Monticello’s African Americans, the paper traces the lives of Madison and Eston Hemings and their descendants after Jefferson’s death in 1826. Far from the hype that attended the family gatherings at Monticello, Stanton and Swann-Wright poignantly capture “the legacies of miscegenation [and] the complexities of racial identity” (163). Jefferson and Sally Hemings left behind. Above all, we learn about the emotional cost to both individuals and families of the process of “passing.” While Madison remained a member of the black community, Eston, as I have mentioned before, crossed the color line when he reached middle age, adopted the name Jefferson, and, together with his family, lived as a white man. The interviews with descendants conducted by Stanton and Swann-Wright record the silences such a move entailed for both siblings and their families, the relinquishing of memories and the creation of

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The paper was presented at a conference on “Sally Hemings & Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture” in Charlottesville, VA, in March 1999, and is included in the proceedings of the conference, published as Sally Hemings & Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture. See above, note 23. For the following quotations, see “Bonds of Memory,” in Sally Hemings & Thomas Jefferson, 161–83.
new family stories, the painful formation of new identities. They also shed light on the “tendency of whites to want to make the rules about race” (172); most importantly, however, as they focus on the story of Sally Hemings and her children as individuals, they “speak [Sally and her family] back into existence, breaking the silence” (181) historians have so long cast over them. Rather than follow academic protocol and suppress the emotional tensions the issue of race brings forth until today, the authors weave their own and very personal sense of the color line into their report, a line that, as Swann-Wright, an African American, says, is “more than a division, separating those with power from those without”; for her, it is “a hard unhoeable row.” For Stanton, who is white, the line is “nebulous, shifting, at times a barricade guarded by gun-toting white men, at times a mist, a white mist into which people disappear” (165f).

At the conference in Charlottesville in March 1999, race was a pervasive topic. One of the prominent senior participants, Winthrop D. Jordan, echoed sentiments often voiced in the press when he ended his contribution with the remark, “perhaps recent developments are pulling us back toward a small part of the world Thomas Jefferson lived in. If so, the inevitable melding— in the long term— of the purportedly different peoples who constitute this nation is ironically anticipated by one of its most important

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42 In Lucia Stanton’s comprehensive account of the African American experience at Monticello, Free Some Day: The African American Families of Monticello (Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation: Monticello Monograph Series, 2000) the story of Jefferson and Sally Hemings is placed in the larger context of the lives of the slaves on Jefferson’s Monticello plantation. Stanton refrains from speculations about the nature of the relationship, venturing only to say that “all evidence tends to support the impression of an enduring connection.” “It is the fate of her children that reveals most about Sally Hemings,” she concludes. “No other enslaved woman at Monticello achieved what she did— the freedom of all of her children, at an age when they could set the courses of their lives” (117). On Sally Hemings, see also Dianne Swann-Wright, “A Railroad in Our Minds,” Potomac Review (Fall 1999), 15–17, and “Sally Hemings,” Footsteps: African American History (Nov./Dec. 1999, Special Monticello Edition). The slaves’ perspective of Jefferson is the subject of Lucia Stanton’s “The Other End of the Telescope: Jefferson through the Eyes of His Slaves,” William and Mary Quarterly, 57: 1 (January 2000), 139–52. The article is part of a “Forum” entitled “Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: Redux,” edited by Jan Lewis, hereafter quoted as “Forum.” For an account of the relationship from Jefferson’s perspective, see Andrew Burstein’s “Jefferson’s Rationalizations,” ibid., 181–98. Burstein disputes the notion of a romantic attachment between Jefferson and Sally Hemings from the perspective of class. “The huge chasm separating male gentry and female slaves or servants contrasts strongly to relations within the culture of sensibility,” he writes; these relations depend on “refined sensations,” which, he thinks, cannot possibly have been part of the Jefferson/Hemings relationship. According to Burstein, Jefferson in all likelihood considered Sally “a healthy, fruitful female” who gave him the “release” nature intended (192, 187).
founders.\textsuperscript{43} Similarly, Gordon S. Wood noted that “our response to the Jefferson–Hemings relationship and the DNA findings suggests that a new world is trying to emerge,” adding that the relationship has “become a new symbol offering perhaps the possibility of some sort of racial reconciliation.”\textsuperscript{44} Other participants tried to place the Jefferson–Hemings liaison within broader historical frameworks. Thus Philip D. Morgan asks us to see it against the background of incidents of interracial sex in the Chesapeake area in the eighteenth century and comparable affairs in the West Indies, warning that “modern notions of romance – seeing Hemings and Jefferson as America’s premier biracial couple – should not be projected onto unions born of trauma, dependence and constraint.”\textsuperscript{45} While interracial sex in the Caribbean was widespread and often openly acknowledged, Morgan writes, in Virginia it was usually clandestine and perhaps less frequent than has generally been claimed. He points out that white fathers rarely admitted parentage of mixed-race children in public; at the same time, he all but disproves the long-standing tradition that Jefferson’s admired teacher and friend George Wythe had a son with a slave. Morgan suggests that Jefferson’s liaison with Sally Hemings followed a pattern similar to that of other cases in Virginia. Typically, it occurred in a family that had an earlier tradition of interracialism.

According to Joshua Rothman, the “cultural code of public silence” about interracial sex explains why Callender’s charges against Jefferson had so little effect in Virginia.\textsuperscript{46} Callender erred when he assumed that his revelations would cause public outrage among Jefferson’s neighbors, as sexual relationships between masters and slaves were part of most Virginians’ “social knowledge.” By keeping his relationship with Sally Hemings discreet, Jefferson conformed to the standard of behavior expected of him, a standard that “entailed never acknowledging any rumors about his sexual behavior and never demonstrating that he cared for his enslaved sex partner or treated any mixed-race offspring as legitimate blood-relations” (105). Rothman confirms the findings of an earlier, pre-DNA article by Robert McDonald which carefully traces the echoes of Callender’s charges and outlines “the code of conduct” to be followed by the plantation owner who had children

\textsuperscript{45} “Interracial Sex in the Chesapeake and the British Atlantic World, c. 1700–1820,” in \textit{Sally Hemings & Thomas Jefferson}, 52–84; 75.
\textsuperscript{46} “James Callender and Social Knowledge of Interracial Sex in Antebellum Virginia,” in \textit{Sally Hemings & Thomas Jefferson}, 87–113; 96.
with his slaves.47 "Callender was blind to the subtleties of the Southern psyche," McDonald writes (55); his accusations did little to damage Jefferson's reputation whose "cool-headed disregard for the charges indicated that he maintained firm control over his passions, his slaves, and himself" (54). In the eyes of his neighbors, Jefferson's more serious offense was his "youthful dalliance" with his friend's wife Betsy Walker, but even if he acted improperly in this case – which he admitted – this had no political relevance as it did not affect his conduct in office (56ff.).

Inevitably, in Charlottesville and elsewhere, the question returned to Jefferson's character. Do the DNA tests add anything to the long acknowledged paradox posed by "Jefferson's egalitarian commitments" on the one hand and "the reality of his life as a slaveholder" on the other? Rather than accuse Jefferson of hypocrisy, as has so often been done in recent years, Jack N. Rakove wants to give him credit for the "painful if disturbing honesty" with which he confronts the problem of creating a biracial society.48 Rakove reminds us that Jefferson's notorious "foray into a proto-scientific racism" in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* "was made in defense not of slavery but of emancipation" (222); the impetus behind Jefferson's "troubled and troubling treatment of race and slavery" was his awareness of "the problem that emancipation of a racially distinct population would pose for the future of republican citizenship" (222). Out of this grew the scheme of colonization and, implied in this scheme, "the recognition that [blacks] were equally entitled, as a people, to reclaim the rights of self-government their enslavement had denied them" (223). But Rakove, Peter Onuf would argue, does not consider the issue of colonization in the personal ramifications it had for Jefferson, nor does he address just what the deportation of a million and a half African Americans that Jefferson proposed would entail.49 Onuf believes that Jefferson's advocacy of colonization as the only possible remedy against "amalgamation" was directly connected with his personal situation; when Jefferson renewed his proposal in a letter of 1824, forty-five years after he had first outlined it, he was – consciously or not – speaking also of his own mixed-race children.50 The "tone of cold calculation" characteristic of the

letter in question (166) suggests that, as far as the slaves and their children were concerned, Jefferson could easily dismiss “the blessings of domestic society” he normally valued so highly. More important was the cause of racially pure republics, one white, the other black, one on the continent of America, the other – by 1824 Jefferson considered this a real possibility – on the island of St. Domingo. If Virginians continued to transgress the racial boundary, the republic would be subverted from within, and “ultimately, scruples of humanity would overshadow and obscure the greater good that colonization promised: the equality and independence of the unjustly enslaved and exploited African people.” Moreover, the black population would increase and eventually threaten “the survival of white Virginia” (159). Fearing a race war, Jefferson admonished his fellow citizens “to rise and be doing.” If in this context he did think of the children he had with Sally Hemings, did he envisage them as future “free white … citizen[s] of the United States” (167)? “By removing the living evidence of their sexual transgressions and freeing the next generation from the temptations to which they had succumbed, the fathers of Virginia would redeem their republic,” Onuf concludes (170). To fathom the personal element at stake in such “redemption” remains a chilling task.

As Americans try to come to terms with Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and the question of race, they may well face, in Jack Rakove’s words, “the disquieting recognition that earlier problems remain [their] own, and more intractably than [they] can comfortably admit.” Annette Gordon-Reed is convinced that for African Americans Jefferson “highlights the divide between black and white Americans’ perception of the world.” “Jefferson could seem no more bizarre than America itself,” she says, his “conflicted nature” serving as a “perfect reflection of the America [blacks] know: a place where high-minded ideals clash with the reality of racial ambivalence.”

If we take the response to the revelations about the Jefferson–Hemings relationship as a measure of the racial divide as it is felt to exist today, where does this leave us? Foremost, I would note the willingness with which most people currently seem to accept the fact that such a relationship did indeed exist. The change in the climate of opinion is all the more evident when we remind ourselves that Virginius Dabney’s indignant The Jefferson Scandals: A Rebuttal came out only twenty years ago. Dabney, like others before him,

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53 See note 6, above. Even in 1981, reviewers were rather cautious in their assessment of Dabney’s professed “indignation,” however; see the reviews by C. Vann Woodward in the
insisted that the charges levied against Jefferson could not possibly be true as they contradicted everything known about his character. Have white Americans, then, by accepting a truth long held by many African Americans, moved closer to a view of American history held by many blacks? What one can safely say, I believe, is that the story of Sally Hemings has helped to remind white Americans not only of the institution of slavery, but of the enslaved people as individuals with their own biographies, with families of their own, and with their own histories. In this respect, the story confirms, and perhaps significantly contributes to, a trend in the rewriting of the history of slavery that began almost thirty years ago with such works as Eugene Genovese’s Roll Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (1972) or John W. Blassingame’s The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the South (1972).

Whether or not the response to the DNA tests also indicates a change in the way the general public conceives of the question of color, and of the impact the color line has on the fabric of American society, is hard to determine. The frequently invoked metaphor of the rainbow family, of racial blurring, or the racially mixed heritage of the nation might lead one to think so, and Winthrop D. Jordan’s observation that the long-held “one-drop rule . . . is currently undergoing a slow process of gradual dissolution” is probably correct. Yet it is difficult not to presume that there is a strong element of wishful thinking in the image of Tom and Sally as “America’s premier biracial couple.” What is one to make of the claim that Americans “are all Jefferson’s children?” Dianne Swann-Wright and Lucia Stanton have pointed out how heavy the burden of a racially mixed heritage for some of his real children was; they have also expressed a sense of the powerful effect the color line continues to have in the present. Does a majority of Americans really think that racial distinctions are, or soon will be, “anachronistic exaggerations or falsehoods”? Recent research does not necessarily confirm such expectations. Moreover, such a view may

New York Times Book Review, 5 July 1981, or by Ralph Ketcham in Journal of American History, 68: 4 (1982), 922–23. Jack N. Rakove, “Jefferson Perceived,” Journal of the Early Republic, 17 (Winter 1997), 677–81, sensed this change long before the results of the DNA tests were published. See his remark that Gordon-Reed’s book “seems to have been written for (or simply against) an earlier age”; the question he wanted her to address is why it is that the “casual dismissal of the possibility of the Jefferson–Hemings relationship [by earlier scholars has given] way to its nearly as casual acceptance (by scholars and citizens alike) today?” (ibid., 683). Gordon S. Wood, too, points to the remarkable “alacrity and enthusiasm with which historians . . . have now come to accept the truth” of the relationship in question; “The Ghosts of Monticello,” 27.

54 “Hemings and Jefferson: Redux,” 50.
once again demonstrate the “tendency of whites to want to make the rules about race.”

Perhaps the willingness of a great number of white people to believe, and to an extent even accept and condone, what only a generation ago was widely held to be a scandalous allegation against the nation’s third president can at least in part be explained by what Christopher Clausen has recently described as the condition of post-culturalism that he finds characteristic of contemporary America. It is a condition in which conflicts based on ethnic or cultural factors are studiously avoided, Clausen holds; what we encounter instead is a “flattening out of cultures” that in turn leads to a “weakening of all normative standards of behavior and judgment” (187). The prevalent “cultural relativism” that Clausen discovers in almost all areas of American life goes hand in hand with an attitude of “non-judgmental inclusiveness” (144); it has evolved to a point, he believes, at which “almost all cultural limitations on individual behavior have come to seem equally outdated, arbitrary, and meaningless” (131). Looked at from the vantage point of post-culturalism, the respect that many newspaper writers so liberally accord Sally Hemings as the mother of Jefferson’s biracial children may turn out to be the result of moral diffidence and easy tolerance rather than an acknowledgment of racial or cultural “otherness.” Hence the eagerness of so many journalists to embrace the idea of one American family. As Clausen sees it, in the state of post-culturalism any former sense of group identity has been replaced by a kind of mass individualism, “an individualism without much individuality” (120). Interestingly, Clausen believes that black Americans, too, have been both “gaining and losing from [post-culturalism].” As the American cultural mosaic fades, he predicts, “supremacists and separatists of any race” will soon “have lost their reason for being” (117). In this sense, perhaps, the two races have moved toward each other after all—not because they respect their differences (as multiculturalists would like to have it), but because in both groups the concept of a culturally based identity has more or less evaporated. Among other causes and effects of post-culturalism, Clausen points with


56 Christopher Clausen, Faded Mosaic: The Emergence of Post-Cultural America (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000).
hope to the dramatic rise in racial and ethnic intermarriage over the past thirty years.

What is the place of Thomas Jefferson in a “post-cultural” America? As Joseph Ellis remarks, “Jefferson has escaped the past” and historians therefore no longer control the way he is perceived by the public. But have historians ever controlled the nation’s “heritage and memories,” or its “popular symbolic traditions,” as Gordon S. Wood calls them? Wood considers the veneration of the “Founding Fathers” enjoy a peculiarly American phenomenon, as few other nations “put such stock in the ideas and behavior of a generation that lived two hundred years ago” (29). The continuing presence of the Founders is part of “the burden of being an American,” he believes, their “deification” a reason that a sober and disinterested assessment of their place in history is so difficult (30). Will the recent revelations about Jefferson and Sally Hemings change this? Or, to put it colloquially, are the Founding Fathers finally becoming history? Given the enormous significance their legacy has for America’s civil religion, and the “symbolic needs” of the country, this is no easy matter. For Jack Rakove the answer is clear. Rakove is convinced that in the long run “Jefferson’s commitment to the principle of government by consent” and his equally strong “commitment to freedom of conscience” will outweigh his possible limitations on questions of slavery and race. Annette Gordon-Reed wants us to phrase the issue differently, and more narrowly. “At the most fundamental level we must now face the question of how to accommodate the new knowledge into Jefferson’s biography,” she says. “Thomas Jefferson had thirteen children, six of whom lived to adulthood. Some of his children were white and some of them were black. … He had a thirty-eight-year, apparently monogamous, relationship with Sally Hemings, an enslaved black woman on his plantation, and fathered a child with her when he was sixty-five years old.” Jefferson’s future reputation, Gordon-Reed argues, will depend on how “we think he conducted himself in this relationship.” But how will we know? Perhaps in the end, as Gordon Wood suspects, we will be left with no more than a paraphrase of the desperate denial Faulkner’s Quentin Compson expresses on the final page of *Absalom, Absalom!*—“We don’t hate him! We don’t hate him.”

The new task for historians, it appears, will be to find out why we don’t hate him.