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ADAM ROTHMAN

Jefferson and Slavery

Once on a magnificent Sunday afternoon I sat with a group of Georgetown University undergraduates on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial, where we discussed the legacy and memory of the author of the Declaration of Independence. What better way to kick off a new semester of “Society and Politics in Jeffersonian America”? Jefferson loomed over us, larger than life. It dawned on me that I was about to spend the next few months attempting to topple that bronze statue from its granite pedestal, hammering away at the gleaming white edifice that shelters it. In 1943 Franklin Roosevelt dedicated the memorial as “a shrine to freedom,” but today it is impossible to overlook the irony of that pronouncement.¹ The transformation in thought and perception provoked by the black freedom movement during the second half of the twentieth century has tarnished Jefferson’s historical reputation while validating his loftiest ideals of universal liberty and equality. Jefferson is now indelibly linked to slavery as well as to freedom. He may seem less heroic than he used to, but history offers some compensation. Jefferson is now the gateway to a more enigmatic and fascinating world.

Jefferson’s entanglement with slavery usually provokes two conflicting attitudes. On the one hand, Jefferson’s defenders reject as “presentist” any criticism of Jefferson according to contemporary standards of morality. They assert that Jefferson should be judged by the standards of his own time rather than ours, and that by the

standards of his time, Jefferson was a pioneering critic of slavery and a relatively benign slave owner. There are some problems with this position. One is that by Jefferson's own standard—the famous proposition from the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”—he fell far short of doing what was right by his slaves. It is true that Jefferson was a pioneering critic of slavery and deserves credit for his eloquent condemnations of the institution. He also had a hand in prohibiting slavery in the Northwest Territory and ending the slave trade to the United States. But he must also be held to account for adding insult to injury through his equally pioneering articulation of racist ideas and policies. Moreover, the claim that he was a benign slave owner is morally bankrupt. If we truly believe that slavery is wrong, then the only truly benign slave owners were the ones who freed their slaves, and not just the ones they had fathered. I do not mean to argue that some slave owners were not better than others. Slaves themselves knew too well the difference between masters who provided adequate food and shelter and rarely used the whip, and those who were cruel and neglectful. Rather, I am insisting that we never lose sight of the inevitable limits to slave owners' morality. As the fictional slave Gabriel puts it in Lafcadio Hearn's novel *Youma*, “there are masters who are better masters than others: there is no good master.”² The whole concept of the benign slave owner originated in slave owners' own efforts to justify their behavior. To defend Jefferson as a good master, then, is to turn his own recognition of frustration and defeat into a moral victory. But more on these matters in due course.

On the other hand, Jefferson's critics often dismiss him as a mere hypocrite, a man who said one thing and did another. Jefferson's actions speak louder than his words; indeed, they drown out his words in a deafening crash of bad faith, broken promises, and racism. Although there is no disputing Jefferson's hypocrisy, this criticism does not take us very far toward understanding the man, nor the trap that he and his fellow slave owners had fallen into, nor

the specific measures that he advocated to get out of it. Nor does Jefferson's own hypocrisy invalidate the ideals he so eloquently expressed. Even as they rejected colonization, abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass, would eventually wield Jefferson's principles and his iconic name in the struggle against a new generation of slave owners who explicitly repudiated them in favor of a counter-revolutionary defense of inequality and slavery. William Morris's *A Dream of John Ball* resonates in this instance: "I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name."³

Thomas Jefferson was not just any old slave owner in any old place. He was a big planter in Virginia, the most populous of the North American states and the one with the most enslaved people. According to the first federal census in 1790, almost 40 percent of Virginia's 750,000 people were slaves, and 42 percent of all enslaved people in the United States lived in Virginia. Almost 45 percent of the people in Jefferson's Albemarle County were enslaved.⁴ During the eighteenth century, the center of gravity of slavery in Virginia shifted from the Tidewater to the Piedmont on the strength of an expanding tobacco plantation economy.⁵ Jefferson was one of the main beneficiaries of that surge. Using tax records from the 1780s, Jackson T. Main determined that Jefferson was one of the hundred wealthiest men in Virginia, with holdings of 12,050 acres of land and 149 slaves spread across two counties.⁶ Jefferson was born into a slave society, and he viewed slavery as part of the United States' colonial legacy, since literally and figuratively he inherited it from his predecessors.

Jefferson's human property came into his possession through inheritance, marriage, purchase, and reproduction. He inherited 40 slaves from his father, received another 135 from his wife's father, purchased 18, and accrued another 400 over the course of his life by what historians generally refer to as the "natural reproduction" of his people. Yet the term "natural reproduction" is really a misnomer.

Enslaved people did have babies, of course, but as Jefferson knew, their reproduction *as slaves* was accomplished by the legislation that declared the offspring of enslaved women to be slaves, not by nature or biology. The law of descent was so deeply woven into the structure of Jefferson's society that it appeared to be one of the natural facts of life, even as it contradicted the usual pattern of inheritance in the English common law. Imagine how different the problem of slavery would have appeared if the status of the children of slave mothers had followed that of their fathers (as was briefly the case in Maryland in the seventeenth century) or, better yet, if all children had been born free. Of course, the growth of the enslaved population in Jefferson's Virginia, as in the other mainland colonies of North America, gave slavery there a unique aspect when compared to the rest of the Americas, where the slave population was sustained only by massive imports from Africa. Jefferson fully understood the profits to be gained through reproduction. Worried by high infant mortality among his enslaved people in 1819, he asked that the overseers allow slave women more time to care for their children. Regarding slave women, he wrote, "it is not their labor, but their increase which is the first consideration with us." Luckily for Jefferson, economic self-interest lined up with his sense of what was morally right, so he could encourage slave reproduction with a clear conscience: "in this, as in all other cases, providence has made our interests & our duties coincide perfectly." It should be noted that this Panglossian outlook was not limited to questions of slavery but was one of Jefferson's ingrained mental habits. His relentless optimism could take on a macabre form, as when he praised yellow fever for stunting the growth of America's cities.⁷

With important exceptions, Jefferson scholars have generally treated slavery as an intellectual and political problem rather than a lived experience or social reality—either for him or the enslaved people who labored for his happiness. Yet sources exist to bear witness to that reality. Jefferson's own correspondence, account books and memoranda; public tax, estate, and census records; the observations of visitors; the recollections and oral histories of slaves

and free people; the shards, artifacts, and residue they left behind: all suggest a dense and complex community of human beings whom scholars have only begun to explore and whose full existence Jefferson himself only dimly comprehended. The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation's Monticello Plantation Database has assembled names and other data on 609 enslaved people "who lived in slavery on Thomas Jefferson's Virginia plantations."⁸ In alphabetical order, the database begins with Abbey, the daughter of Sally and Gawen, and ends with Zachary, the son of Lucy Gillette and a father whom we do not know. One good result of the controversy over the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings is that it has energized historians to dig deeper into the social life of Jefferson's slaves.⁹

Theirs was a routine of work—the cultivation of tobacco, wheat, hemp, and foodstuffs; the artisanal craftsmanship of coopers, blacksmiths, and seamstresses; the domestic service of cooks, laundresses, and hostlers. Jefferson could invent devices to hide their labor from view inside the main house at Monticello, but he could not render their labor completely invisible—especially not to the slaves themselves, who were keenly aware of its value. Their families formed an intricate web, as the slave censuses in Jefferson's Farm Book graphically reveal. The Hemings clan stands out for its genetic and social proximity to Jefferson's innermost family circle, but other slave families inhabited Monticello and Poplar Forest, too, including the Colberts, Fossetts, Gillettes, Herns, Hubbards, and Hugheses (not to mention many others without recorded surnames). In the controversy about Sally Hemings and Jefferson's black descendants, the other slaves have largely been overlooked. The oral histories of former slaves from Monticello display an impressive genealogical knowledge, a sense of kinship that partially insulated them from one of the essential conditions of enslavement identified by sociologist Orlando Patterson: natal alienation, the symbolic obliteration of enslaved peoples' ancestry and heritage.¹⁰

The more scholars delve into the dynamics of community life on Jefferson's plantations, the less that life resembles the formerly con-

ventional stereotypes of plantation history. The intricate kinship between white and black families, which Sally Hemings has come to symbolize, is only the tip of the iceberg.¹¹ For example, enslaved people had ample opportunities to truck, barter, and exchange (to use Adam Smith's famous phrase). Indeed, this phenomenon concerned Jefferson, who warned Thomas Mann Randolph in 1798 to prevent the slaves from growing their own tobacco. "I have ever found it necessary to confine them to such articles as are not raised for the farm. [T]here is no other way of drawing a line between what is theirs & mine."¹² Archaeologists at Poplar Forest have discovered locks and keys in the slave quarters, suggesting that enslaved people had possessions they wished to safeguard.¹³ The idea of slaves owning, or at least possessing, their own property and having a customary right to "what is theirs" may seem counterintuitive, but as Patterson has argued, this *peculium* was a nearly universal privilege of slaves everywhere and at all times. It gave them a positive incentive to work and a stake in the system, but it also gave them a sense of the value of their own labor as well as their right to the fruits of it. Revelations like these pose a considerable intellectual challenge for scholars, who walk a tightrope in retaining a moral disgust for slavery while recognizing the range and complexity of social relations that it allowed.¹⁴

Even admitting this complexity, the plantation milieu was undeniably hierarchical and coercive, and so it remains puzzling that Jefferson came to champion a set of values so corrosive to the foundations of his own society. What was the relationship between slavery and Jefferson's ideals of liberty and equality? That this was a puzzle occurred to intellectuals in Jefferson's era. In 1775 the English biographer Samuel Johnson skewered the whiny Americans with his famous quip: "How is it that we hear the loudest *yelps* for liberty among the drivers of negroes?"¹⁵ Johnson meant only to indict the colonists' hypocrisy and undermine their moral credentials, but he actually raised a difficult question. Orlando Patterson has offered one explanation of slaveholders' zeal for liberty. Slaveholders were acutely sensitive to threats to their liberty and slights to

their honor precisely because they deprived others around them of freedom and honor. The slaveholders' esteem for freedom and honor was elevated by their immediate appreciation of the contrast between those who possessed these traits and those who lacked them. Hence, the fear of enslavement, so overwhelming in American Revolutionary rhetoric, drew its intensity and power from the colonists' horror at the condition in which they held their own slaves.¹⁶ Edmund S. Morgan offers a different though not incompatible explanation for the apparent paradox of freedom-loving slave owners. He contends that the emergence of slavery in colonial Virginia obviated the need for an unruly class of free, poor people in Virginia, making it possible for Virginia's aristocrats to champion liberty and equality without reservation—or, rather, by reserving liberty and equality for the free, white population, which was the only population encompassed by that ambiguous term, "the people."¹⁷ Yet both the Patterson and Morgan theses explain only why the Virginia gentry would have favored their own freedom. They cannot explain why Jefferson would have taken the crucial ideological leap of extending that ideal to all human beings—thus threatening the very social order that had nurtured him. To explain this startling development, we have to take into account two broader contexts: Jefferson's transatlantic world of letters and the revolt of the British mainland North American colonies.

Isaac Jefferson recalled that his old master "want rich himself—only his larnin."¹⁸ Surrounded by books and in constant correspondence with a far-flung array of leading intellectuals, Thomas Jefferson joined the Enlightenment. His engagement with various strands of Western European thought—as represented by Locke, Montesquieu, and others—taught Jefferson that slavery was an obstacle to the fulfillment of the human mind rather than the necessary condition of his own mind's pursuits.¹⁹ In the struggle for national independence, Jefferson universalized this antislavery position and deployed it to advance the American colonies' claims to self-government, refute charges of hypocrisy like the one leveled by Samuel Johnson, and attack the moral legitimacy of the king and the

colonial system. Jefferson's notorious, excised assault on the transatlantic slave trade in his original draft of the Declaration of Independence accomplished all of these goals at once. Jefferson criticized King George III for engaging in this "cruel war against human nature itself," preventing the colonial legislatures from prohibiting it, and then inciting rebellions among the slaves, "thus paying off former crimes committed against the LIBERTIES of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the LIVES of another."²⁰ Jefferson boldly identified Africans as a people deserving of life and liberty. He decried the slave trade as "piratical warfare" and repudiated the buying and selling of human beings. All of these were precocious criticisms of the Atlantic slave trade, which was in fact dominated by British carriers in the eighteenth century. But what also lurked insidiously in this passage, as Peter Onuf has argued, is Jefferson's sense of Africans and Americans as separate and distinct, "one people" and "another." He implied not just that Africans stood outside the Revolution, but also that they were the pawns of its enemies.²¹

In the early 1780s Jefferson had another opportunity to take stock of the meaning and significance of slavery for the future of his country. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson's response to queries posed by a French diplomat, was both his most fully developed contribution to the transatlantic world of letters and a piece of nationalist propaganda. The *Notes* ranged widely across the geography, demography, economy, politics, culture, history, and future of Virginia. It joined empirical detail with sublime rhetoric. Students' eyes glaze over as they slog through the tedious lists and tables of plants and animals in Query IV, but then they open up again and focus intently when Jefferson veers unexpectedly into an extended defense of the American Indian character and once again when he confronts the problem of slavery. It is in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that Jefferson discloses his full horror of slavery and reveals his preferred solution, which he regretfully concludes cannot be accomplished. How does Jefferson arrive at this dead end?

We must logically begin with Query XVIII, entitled, "The par-

ticular *customs and manners that may happen to be received in that state?*"²² Suppose someone were to ask you to describe the customs and manners of the people in your neighborhood. What would you focus on? Most of us would dwell on patterns of etiquette. Are the people rude or friendly? What are their favorite foods? Do they appreciate the arts or enjoy sports? We might not think to describe whether they are just, whether they house the homeless and feed the hungry, or whether they conserve energy or protect the environment. Yet it is worth remembering that there has been a long tradition of thinking about manners in a different light. In *Leviathan*, for instance, the grim Thomas Hobbes had written, "By manners, I mean not here decency of behaviour, as how one man should salute another, or how a man should wash his mouth, or pick his teeth before company, and such other points of the *small morals*, but those qualities of mankind that concern their living together in peace and unity."²³ This latter concept of manners resembles what Jefferson had in mind when he wrote *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Manners involve the unwritten norms of conduct and behavior, the habits and rituals that regulate social relations between people. When a society's manners are healthy, it will enjoy peace, but when they are foul, conflict will rage.

That concept of manners explains why, seemingly out of nowhere, Jefferson launched into an eloquent, anguished exposé of the destructive impact of slavery on his nation. "The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions," he writes, "the most unrelenting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. . . . The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious particularities."²⁴ Modern readers instinctively read this in the light of Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, but sexual abuse is only a symptom of the general and basic evil of slavery that Jefferson alluded to here. Unfettered power corrupts, opening the way for pas-

sion to triumph over reason. Jefferson predicted that slavery would have fatal consequences for republican society. Slavery deformed the morals of the citizenry, created a dangerous domestic enemy, sapped the desire to work, and unmoored the American belief in liberty. At last Jefferson comes to his wit's end: "Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference!"²⁵ Now keep in mind that Jefferson did not believe in miracles; nor was he prone to invoking the prospect of divine intervention. That he invoked it here signals Jefferson's intellectual crisis. He appears temporarily unhinged by slavery. His "smile of reason" has turned into a frown.²⁶ But then Jefferson regained his composure and inched back from the precipice. He optimistically concluded that the times were changing and everything would be just fine. "The spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying, the way I hope preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation, and that this is disposed, in the order of events, to be with the consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation."²⁷ No more trembling.

What, then, was to be done to prevent this looming national catastrophe and hasten the day of total emancipation? Jefferson provided his answer in Query XIV, entitled "*The administration of justice and description of the laws?*"²⁸ In describing plans for republicanizing the laws of Virginia, Jefferson elaborated on a proposed law for the eradication of slavery in the state. The law would have emancipated all slaves born after its passage, allowed them to remain with their parents until a certain age, and educated them at public expense "to tillage, arts or sciences" until the age of eighteen for females and twenty-one for males, when they would be "colonized" outside the state, established elsewhere as a "free and independent people," and replaced by white immigrants.²⁹ This perverse scheme of affirmative action for the children of slaves exemplifies the central features

of the republican antislavery program. It provided for a very gradual transition to a free, white society that would have taken generations to accomplish. It respected slave owners' property interests insofar as it did not propose to emancipate slaves born before the passage of the act, although slave owners would have viewed the denial of their claim to the offspring of female slaves as a major infringement on their property rights. It established an intermediate stage between slavery and freedom for the freed children of slaves, who as minors were not entitled to full citizenship rights in any case. It required the state to educate and prepare them to become free men and women, and finally, it envisioned their deportation once they reached the age of maturity. What a bittersweet moment that would have been for those young Afro-Virginians who finally attained their freedom at the cost of their family and country!

Anticipating one obvious objection, Jefferson asked, "Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state?" His famous answer was that emancipation without deportation would lead to a genocidal race war. "Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race."³⁰ Jefferson could have stopped there, but instead he wasted no time in providing an example of the deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites. He launched into a long and notorious rumination on the ugliness, physical differences, and moral and intellectual inferiority of black people as compared with whites, concluding, "This unfortunate difference of color, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people."³¹ As Barbara Fields has argued, Jefferson ended up blaming race—not racism, the true culprit—for the impasse at emancipation.³² Other Virginia slave owners were more forthright than Jefferson in identifying the real sticking point, which was not the slaves' incapacity for freedom but slave owners' reluctance to give up their property and make do without slave labor.

As Patrick Henry acknowledged in a letter to Anthony Benezet in January 1773, "I am drawn along by the general inconvenience of living here without them."³³ Jefferson's account of the difficulties facing his proposal for the gradual eradication of slavery never fully confronted the political and economic interests arrayed against it. These he concealed behind the smokescreen of race.

Thomas Jefferson's retreat into race-thinking was not a personal quirk or character flaw. Other liberal intellectuals who faced analogous tasks of justifying inequality in different places and at different times took a similar tack. The political theorist Uday Mehta contends that liberalism, while ostensibly universalistic, has been historically exclusionary in practice, and that liberalism's exclusionary practices have a theoretical foundation. That foundation is the implicit demand for what he calls "a thicker set of social credentials that constitute the real bases of political inclusion." It turns out that just being human is not enough to claim the enjoyment of one's natural rights. For John Locke, reason was a necessary credential for political inclusion, so children and the insane could not be included in the circle of people entitled to exercise and enjoy their rights. In the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill required a sufficiently advanced stage of civilizational development, which in his mind excluded the people of India from self-government and justified British colonialism. A similar logic applies to Jefferson's attempt to reconcile democratic republicanism with slavery. For Jefferson, race became the vocabulary of legitimate exclusion, the rational explanation for why people of African descent lacked the necessary credentials for political inclusion in the United States.³⁴

Readers often puzzle over the relationship between Jefferson's attack on slavery in Query XVIII and his racist defense of colonization in Query XIV. The two passages seem opposed to each other in body and spirit. Yet the two passages can be reconciled by paying close attention to the criticisms that Jefferson levels against slavery. The key to understanding Jefferson's racist exclusionism is Jefferson's inability to imagine enslaved people as having any patriotism toward the country that enslaved them. In Query XVIII he wrote:

And with what execration should the statesman be loaded, who permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, and the amor patriae of the other. For if a slave can have a country in this world, it must be any other in preference to that in which he is born to live and labour for another: in which he must lock up the faculties of his nature, contribute as far as depends on his individual endeavours to the evanishment of the human race, or entail his own miserable condition on the endless generations proceeding from him.³⁵

In this passage, Jefferson transformed slaves from the “one people” of the Declaration of Independence’s excised slave trade clause into “one half the citizens” of Virginia. Yet he transforms them into citizens only to deny that they have any patriotism. The robbery of their labor alienates them from their country. Whether patriotism could be demanded or expected from slaves was an issue in the intriguing case of Billy, a “Mulatto slave” belonging to the estate of John Taylor. Billy was convicted of treason in 1781 after having been captured from an enemy vessel. Two members of the Prince William County jury protested Billy’s conviction on the grounds that the court lacked proof that he had voluntarily taken up arms and, moreover, that the treason charge was improper, since “a slave in our opinion Cannot Commit Treason against the State not being Admitted to the Priviledges of a Citizen owes the State No Allegiance and that the Act declaring what shall be treason cannot be intended by the Legislature to include slaves who have neither lands or other property to forfeit.” Their argument against the treason charge was consistent with the view that Jefferson later expressed in Query XVIII that slaves could have no allegiance to the country they lived in. As governor of Virginia in 1781, Jefferson did indeed grant Billy a reprieve (although he did not explain why), and a month later the Virginia House of Delegates and Senate quashed the “illegal” indictment, saving Billy’s neck and the property interest of John Taylor’s estate.³⁶

Twenty-one of Jefferson's own slaves defected to the British in 1781.³⁷ Perhaps he understood their flight as the understandable response of an oppressed and alienated people. It is more likely that he thought they had been enticed away, deceived, or stolen by the British. But what about those who remained behind, or the enslaved people who actively supported the Revolution—how did Jefferson understand their motives and actions? A small number of enslaved Virginians joined the Revolutionary cause as soldiers, sailors, and spies, and the state of Virginia eventually manumitted a few of them in recognition of their service.³⁸ Jefferson may have dismissed these enslaved "patriots" as exceptional, narrowly self-interested, or motivated by personal ties to their masters. He could not allow that they might have been fighting for their country or its avowed principles, as one enslaved Virginian named Saul insisted in a 1792 petition asking that the Virginia legislature emancipate him in recognition of his military service during the war. "He was taught to know that War was levied upon America, not for the Emancipation of Blacks, but for the Subjugation of Whites," read the petition, "and he thought the number of Bond-men ought not to be augmented."³⁹

In Query XVIII, Jefferson condemned slavery for depriving enslaved people of their God-given natural right to freedom, but the consequences of the crime prevented a simple restoration of their rights. To borrow a term from twentieth-century debates over racial integration, Jefferson suggested that slavery had "damaged" enslaved people and rendered them unfit for freedom. They had been kept ignorant and stripped of the moral sense, thus unmanning them for citizenship. To set them free under these conditions would be cruel to them and dangerous to society.⁴⁰ Jefferson struck precisely this note in his famous letter to Edward Coles thirty years later, observing that "men probably of any color, but of this color we know, brought from their infancy without necessity for thought or forecast, are by their habits rendered as incapable as children of taking care of themselves."⁴¹ That slaves required some tutelage to prepare them for freedom was a common argument among slavery's American and European critics throughout the late eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries. It legitimized schemes to create way stations between slavery and freedom that would teach former slaves to exercise their newfound liberty in the right way, which usually meant working for their former masters as if nothing had changed. The argument undergirded Victor Hugues's repressive labor policy in Guadeloupe in the late 1790s as well as the apprenticeship system in the British West Indies in the 1830s and the *patronato* in Cuba in the 1880s.⁴²

Jefferson's inability to imagine a basis for African American citizenship in the United States emerged from his concept of slavery as an abstract philosophical horror, which obscured the actual lived experience of the enslaved people all around him. Contrary to his allegation, enslaved Afro-Virginians and African Americans in general were not alienated from the country where they lived and worked for their masters' benefit. At a place like Monticello they had sunk deep roots into the ground, nurtured kin and community, taken pride in their work, and realized its value. Jefferson understood this enough to recognize that selling one of his slaves to a Georgia trader was the equivalent of sentencing him to exile.⁴³ That he could propose to sweep all those accomplishments away by his callous scheme of deportation shows just how shallow his legendary affection for the African American men and women under his control really was. Time and again throughout the nineteenth century, most African Americans would repudiate such ideas of so-called colonization to distant lands. One who did so in fiery terms was the radical abolitionist David Walker, who challenged Jefferson head-on in his 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*. Walker declared, "America is more our country, than it is the whites—we have enriched it with our *blood and tears*."⁴⁴ He rooted black patriotism in the blood sacrifice of his people. The country belonged to them because they had built it and died for it, albeit involuntarily. The experience had not alienated them from the land but rather deepened their claim to it in ways that Jefferson could not permit himself to fully comprehend.

Despite the best efforts of the American Colonization Society, which did manage to ship around thirty thousand people to Liberia

in the nineteenth century, Jefferson's vision of post-nati emancipation and deportation did not come to fruition. While free black resistance thwarted colonization, a proslavery retrenchment in Virginia blocked emancipation in any legislative form and constricted manumission.⁴⁵ Virginia slave owners were attached to the wealth and labor embodied by their slaves, and they gilded that attachment with arguments drawn from their Christian heritage and Revolutionary experience.⁴⁶ Faced with this intransigent public opinion, Jefferson devised another strategy aimed at displacing the problem of slavery altogether through a dual strategy of ending slave importation and encouraging slave exportation. "Diffusion," as it is known, restricted slave population growth to biolegal reproduction while granting slave owners the freedom to transport their human property to the newly organized territories and states of the Southwest. Virginians explicitly articulated this agenda in debates over the status of slavery in the Mississippi and Orleans Territories in 1798 and 1804, and Jefferson endorsed it. He seemed to believe that these policies would slowly reduce the density of slaves in the eastern states, diminish the danger they posed, and eventually result in the softening of slave owners' attitudes toward emancipation. Diffusion attached both slavery and the hope of emancipation to Western expansion. It imagined a voluntary, market-driven transition to freedom that also undermined the possibility of slave rebellion. It would have taken a very long time to accomplish, which was a hallmark of all Jefferson's schemes for abolition, even had it not already been fatally compromised by the persistent growth of Virginia's slave population. Daniel Raymond laid diffusion to rest in 1819, writing that it was "about as effectual a remedy for slavery as it would be for the smallpox."⁴⁷

Jefferson's approach to the problem of slavery was remarkably consistent from the publication of *Notes on the State of Virginia* until his death. He favored prohibiting slave imports; emancipating, educating, and deporting the children of slaves; permitting slave owners to carry their human property into the West; and ultimately replacing slaves with free white immigrants. In short, he wanted to

kill slavery and hide the body. The free white republic would not appear overnight, but Jefferson was confident it would eventually be achieved. "The revolution in public opinion which this cause requires," he wrote shortly before his death, "is not to be expected in a day, or perhaps in an age; but time, which outlives all things, will outlive this evil also."⁴⁸ He hoped subsequent generations would continue the work of moral progress, although during the Missouri Crisis he feared they would throw it all away. In the meantime, as Jefferson advised Edward Coles, the best that could be done under the circumstances was "to feed and clothe them well, protect them from ill usage, require such reasonable labor only as is performed voluntarily by freemen, & be led by no repugnancies to abdicate them, and our duties to them."⁴⁹ Thus, the very idea of the benign slave owner originated as a sigh of resignation, an admission of momentary moral retreat. As slavery bloomed in the southern United States in the first half of the nineteenth century, reestablishing itself on the basis of cotton and sugar, southwestern expansion, and the domestic slave trade, that sigh of resignation condensed into proslavery dogma.

Ultimately, Jefferson's antislavery commitments were distorted by a black hole at the center of his political universe. Although largely invisible to Jefferson himself and to subsequent generations of historians, it exerted a powerful gravitational pull on everything around it. That black hole is another name for what the historical anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called "unthinkable history." In an essay on the Haitian Revolution, Trouillot explains that "the unthinkable is that which one cannot conceive within the range of possible alternatives, that which perverts all answers because it defies the terms under which the questions were phrased." For Trouillot, the slave rebellion at the core of the Haitian Revolution was "unthinkable" in the terms of Enlightenment discourse, "unthinkable" to slave owners and their allies all around the Atlantic world. It is not that they did not know about it or talk about it. In fact, they were obsessed with it and wrote about it incessantly. The point is that they lacked the intellectual tools to really understand it prop-

erly, and so they tried to suppress and trivialize it. Trouillot points out that these tendencies were largely reproduced in subsequent historical scholarship. Where is Haiti, for instance, in R. R. Palmer's magisterial history, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*?⁵⁰

For a long time, Jefferson scholars ignored the presence and perspective of African Americans. Theirs was an unthinkable history, as the controversy over Jefferson's alleged relationship with Sally Hemings revealed. Dumas Malone, Jefferson's great biographer, insisted that a sexual relationship between Jefferson and Hemings would have been "distinctly out of character, being virtually unthinkable in a man of Jefferson's moral standards and habitual conduct."⁵¹ Malone's choice of words tells the tale. He reduced a complex interaction to the single question of Jefferson's character, and he dismissed countervailing testimony offered by Jefferson's black descendants. Thus, he rendered the Jefferson-Hemings affair "unthinkable." Similarly, Jefferson's defenders often suggest that it is inconceivable that Jefferson could have advocated immediate abolition and black citizenship. These cards were simply not on the table. But why not? That these options were unthinkable to Jefferson should not make them unthinkable to Jefferson's historians. There is a current vogue among historians for taking historical subjects on their own terms. If this were truly achieved, we would be nothing more than stenographers. Instead, historians have an obligation to look at history in ways that our historical subjects did not, with the benefit of hindsight, using all the analytical tools at our disposal, including many that were not available to the people we study. This means that we must explain why Jefferson could not imagine immediate abolition and black citizenship. The answer lies in the black hole generated by slavery, which never permitted the real desires of enslaved African Americans to see the light of day.

Jefferson's inability to imagine immediate abolition and black citizenship rested on the suppression of the hopes and dreams of the enslaved people all around him. Jefferson left behind mountains of words. They have been celebrated, inscribed in the walls of monuments, transformed into national scripture. His slaves left behind

mere shards and fragments of thought, like the extraordinary memoir of Madison Hemings, which Jefferson's historians have too often neglected, ridiculed, or trivialized. This asymmetry reflects the imbalance of power between Jefferson and his slaves and the imbalance of honor paid to them. Had Jefferson and other slave owners granted enslaved people an opportunity to express themselves freely, the slave owners might have learned that the people under their dominion preferred to be free; wanted to stay where they were; and for once, wanted to labor for their own happiness. But of course, there was no such opportunity. For one thing, law and custom barred enslaved people from learning to read and write, and those who did learn had to be very cautious in exercising their talents.⁵² Moreover, the threat of reprisal deterred enslaved people from saying anything within earshot of their owners except what they thought their masters were willing to hear—the famous tactic of “puttin’ Ole Massa on.”⁵³ Late in his life, Jefferson appears to have had a fleeting moment of awareness that his scheme for colonization depended on this suppression of African Americans’ own true preferences. In his 1824 letter to Jared Sparks, in which (not coincidentally) he acknowledges Haitian independence, Jefferson admonished the younger generation not to delay in getting rid of the blacks before it was too late. “A million and a half are within their control; but six millions, (which a majority of those now living will see them attain,) and one million of these fighting men, will say ‘we will not go.’”⁵⁴ And that is indeed what happened once slavery’s gravitational field collapsed and the genuine voices of newly freed people were finally heard through the din and ruin of war.

NOTES

1. Edward T. Folliard, “Shrine to Freedom,” *Washington Post*, April 14, 1943, 1.
2. Lafcadio Hearn, *Youma: The Story of a West-Indian Slave* (New York, 1890), 119.
3. William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball and a King’s Lesson* (London, 1913), 39–40.

4. These figures are from the Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html> (accessed September 28, 2007).

5. Philip D. Morgan and Michael L. Nicholls, "Slaves in Piedmont Virginia, 1720–1790," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd. ser., 46 (April 1989): 211–51 [hereafter, WMQ].

6. Jackson Turner Main, "The One Hundred," WMQ, 3rd ser., 11 (July 1954): 377.

7. TJ to Joel Yancey, January 17, [18]19, in Edwin Morris Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book, with Commentary and Relevant Extracts from Other Writings* (Princeton, N.J., 1953), 43. On the social, as opposed to natural, reproduction of the enslaved population in the United States, see Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000). For Jefferson's remarks on yellow fever, see TJ to Benjamin Rush, September 23, 1800, in Jefferson, *Writings* [Peterson], 1080–81.

8. "Introduction," Monticello Plantation Database, <http://plantationdb.monitcello.org/> (accessed September 27, 2007).

9. Two important contributions to the social history of enslaved people living at Monticello and Jefferson's other plantations are Barbara J. Heath, *Hidden Lives: The Archaeology of Slave Life at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest* (Charlottesville, Va., 1999), and Lucia C. Stanton, "'Those Who Labor For My Happiness': Thomas Jefferson and His Slaves," in *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter Onuf (Charlottesville, Va., 1993), 147–80. To these must be added Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York, 2008).

10. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 5–10. Annette Gordon-Reed provides an important vindication of Madison Hemings's memoir in *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville, Va., 1997). Gordon-Reed's book also reprints the memoirs of Madison Hemings and Israel Jefferson.

11. I use the racial designation *black* with the caveat that it utterly fails to comprehend the range and diversity of complexion and skin color among people of African descent.

12. TJ to Thomas Mann Randolph, June 14, [17]98, in Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book*, 269.

13. Heath, *Hidden Lives*, 62–64.

14. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 182–86. Dylan C. Penningroth offers an incisive analysis of property ownership among enslaved people in the United States in *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003), chap. 2.

15. Quoted in David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), 275.

16. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 94–97. See also F. Nwabueze Okoye, “Chattel Slavery as the Nightmare of the American Revolutionaries,” *WMQ*, 3rd ser., 37 (January 1980): 3–28.
17. Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975).
18. Rayford W. Logan, “Memoirs of a Monticello Slave,” *WMQ*, 3rd ser., 8 (October 1951): 568.
19. Lewis P. Simpson, *Mind and the American Civil War: A Meditation on Lost Causes* (Baton Rouge, La., 1989), chap. 1.
20. “Declaration of Independence,” in Jefferson, *Writings* [Peterson], 22.
21. Peter S. Onuf, “‘To Declare Them a Free and Independant People’: Race, Slavery, and National Identity in Jefferson’s Thought,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 18 (Spring 1998): 1–46. For the strategic deployment of antislavery rhetoric in the American Revolution, see Peter A. Dorsey, “‘To Corroborate Our Own Claims’: Public Positioning and the Slavery Metaphor in Revolutionary America,” *American Quarterly* 55 (September 2003): 353–86.
22. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in Jefferson, *Writings* [Peterson], 288–89.
23. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. A. P. Martinich (Petersborough, Canada, 2002), 75.
24. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in Jefferson, *Writings* [Peterson], 288.
25. *Ibid.*, 289.
26. Simpson refers to Jefferson’s “smile of reason” in *Mind and the American Civil War*, 14. On Jefferson’s momentary lapse of reason, see Barbara J. Fields, “Of Rogues and Geldings,” *American Historical Review* 108 (December 2003): 1399. For Jefferson’s view of divine intervention in history, see Eugene R. Sheridan, “Liberty and Virtue: Religion and Republicanism in Jeffersonian Thought,” in *Thomas Jefferson and the Education of a Citizen*, ed. James Gilreath (Washington, D.C., 1999), 244–45.
27. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in Jefferson, *Writings* [Peterson], 289.
28. *Ibid.*, 264–70.
29. *Ibid.*, 264.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, 270.
32. Fields, “Of Rogues and Geldings,” 1398–99.
33. Quoted in “Letters of Anthony Benezet,” *Journal of Negro History* 2 (January 1917): 88. I am grateful to Maurice Jackson for bringing Patrick Henry’s letter to my attention.
34. Uday S. Mehta, “Liberal Strategies of Exclusion,” *Politics and Society* 18 (December 1990): 427–54 (quotation at 429).
35. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in Jefferson, *Writings* [Peterson], 288.
36. Jefferson, *Papers*, 5:640–43. Billy’s case is discussed in Malick W. Gha-

chem, "The Slave's Two Bodies: The Life of an American Legal Fiction," *WMQ*, 3rd ser., 60 (October 2003): 834–36.

37. Cassandra Pybus, "Jefferson's Faulty Math: The Question of Slave Defections in the American Revolution," *WMQ*, 3rd ser., 62 (April 2005): 243–64.

38. On the perhaps five hundred Afro-Virginians who fought on the Revolutionary side, see L. P. Jackson, "Virginia Negro Soldiers and Seamen in the American Revolution," *Journal of Negro History* 27 (July 1942): 247–87. Twenty-five of the 150 Afro-Virginian soldiers and sailors Jackson identified by name were slaves.

39. Quoted in Willie Lee Rose, *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America* (New York, 1976), 62.

40. On slavery's damage to the moral sense, and hence to one's capacity for citizenship, see Ari Helo and Peter Onuf, "Jefferson, Morality, and the Problem of Slavery," *WMQ*, 3rd ser., 60 (July 2003): 583–614.

41. TJ to Edward Coles, August 25, 1814, in Jefferson, *Writings* [Peterson], 1345.

42. On French antislavery and the Caribbean, see Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004), especially chap. 6. On the transition from slavery to freedom in comparative perspective, see Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2000).

43. TJ to Thomas Mann Randolph, June 8, 1803, in Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book*, 19.

44. David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal, to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, ed. Peter P. Hinks (University Park, Pa., 2000), 67.

45. Eva Sheppard Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion* (Baton Rouge, La., 2006).

46. For a sampling of these arguments, see Fredrika Teute Schmidt and Barbara Ripel Wilhelm, "Early Proslavery Petitions in Virginia," *WMQ*, 3rd ser., 30 (January 1973): 133–46.

47. I discuss diffusionism at greater length in Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 24–31 (quotation at 210).

48. TJ to James Heaton, May 20, 1826, in Jefferson, *Writings* [Peterson], 1516.

49. TJ to Edward Coles, August 25, 1814, *ibid.*, 1346.

50. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "From Planters' Journals to Academia: The Haitian Revolution as Unthinkable History," *Journal of Caribbean History* 25, nos. 1–2 (1991): 81–99 (quotation at 85).

51. Malone quoted in Clarence Walker, "Denial Is Not a River in Egypt," in

Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture, ed. Jan Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville, Va., 1999), 194. See also Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*.

52. James Oakes, "Why Slaves Can't Read: The Political Significance of Jefferson's Racism," in Gilreath, ed., *Thomas Jefferson and the Education of a Citizen*, 177–92.

53. See Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 609–12 (quotation at 610). Genovese traces the practice to West African etiquette, and he argues that however necessary it may have been as a strategy for survival, the habit of lying had deep moral costs for enslaved people in the long run.

54. TJ to Jared Sparks, February 4, 1824, in Jefferson, *Writings* [Peterson], 1487.