Beyond Biography, Through Biography, Toward an Integrated History
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Reviews in American History, Volume 37, Number 2, June 2009, pp. 161-167 (Review)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/rah.0.0102

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BEYOND BIOGRAPHY, THROUGH BIOGRAPHY, TOWARD AN INTEGRATED HISTORY

David Waldstreicher


To comprehend the nature and existence of Annette Gordon-Reed’s much-heralded, exquisitely crafted, triumphant history of Sally Hemings and her family, it helps to look back a decade, to a set of developments in public history and scholarship that Gordon-Reed herself helped initiate.

In *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1997), Gordon-Reed carefully evaluated the evidence for Jefferson’s paternity of some or all of Hemings’s children, beginning with that testimony first put into print publicly by James Thomas Callendar in 1802 and later confirmed in published interviews by Hemings’s descendants. She admitted the hearsay nature of the positive evidence and made her best case by undermining the other side’s arguments, showing that it amounted to far less than “proof” of Jefferson’s nonpaternity. The testimonies relied upon by Virginius Dabney, John C. Miller, Merrill Peterson, Douglass Adair, et al. derived from Jefferson’s family and partisan supporters. Indeed, nineteenth-century defenders of Jefferson had more reasons to dissemble or even destroy evidence, but their words had been taken at face value well into the twentieth century. Especially in the wake of Fawn Brodie’s *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974), the dismissal by what Brodie called “the Jefferson establishment” of testimony suggesting a sexual relationship, including Hemings family oral history, showed a “basic disrespect for readers of history” insofar as it did not stand up to the same evidentiary standards to which those historians claimed fealty—unless, that is, one simply assumed that slaveholders and their families told truer stories than slaves and their children did.¹

By 1997 fewer historians believed that to be the case. Embarrassed at being called to task so expertly and carefully by someone outside the profession (Gordon-Reed is a lawyer by training), they began to reconsider the pat answers they gave to students.² The burden of proof shifted. In an alternatively legalistic mode, some called for genetic analysis as the only possible way to settle the matter. In 1999 a DNA study of male Jefferson and Hemings descendants

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confirmed a genetic link, though one that excluded members of the Woodson family, who also claimed descent. Joseph J. Ellis immediately jumped the Jefferson establishment ship, coauthoring the article in *Nature* magazine that announced the DNA study and proclaiming that the evidence for paternity actually confirmed the essential truth of his larger analysis, in *American Sphinx* (1996), of Jefferson’s contradictory, self-deceptive nature. Fraser D. Nieman, an archaeologist at Monticello, performed a statistical probability analysis of the coincidence of Jefferson’s visits to Monticello and Sally Hemings’s later pregnancies, concluding that anyone else’s paternity seemed highly unlikely. Conferences in Charlottesville, which yielded speedy publications, reconsidered the entire question of slavery at Monticello, Jefferson’s personality, and his ideas about race and slavery. Gordon-Reed’s carefulness in interpretation and her disinclination to gloat about having been proved right helped set the constructive tone for these interchanges. In January of 2000, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation itself abandoned the leaky vessel of what then could no longer even be called the Jefferson establishment, issuing a statement that it believed that Jefferson at least had a longstanding sexual relationship with Hemings, that he was probably the father of all six of her children, and that interpretation at the house site would in the future take this into account. The next year, for Jefferson’s birthday, President Bush had dozens of white and black descendants to lunch at the White House. The question was no longer whether Jefferson had sex with one of his slaves. It was what to make of that fact.

In books and conference sessions, leading historians urged subtlety and caution. In the press, however, Jefferson began to appear as a kind of founding hypocrite—at best—and at worst a founding rapist. Jefferson’s reputation was going downhill fast. Despite what Ellis had called a sesquicentennial “Jeffersonian surge” circa 1993, biographies and televised miniseries of the new millennium followed Ellis in subjecting Jefferson to caustic treatment for his idealism and hypocrisy while lauding his Federalist critics John Adams and Alexander Hamilton as great nationalists who not coincidentally, it was said (but not really demonstrated), had been truly—not hypocritically or opportunistically—antislavery. Historians like Garry Wills—perhaps out of shame for having taken so long to see the light?—joined happily in the tendency to excoriate Jefferson as the Founding Hypocrite. In Roger Kennedy’s *Mr. Jefferson’s Lost Cause* (2003) and Wills’s “Negro President” (2005), Jefferson became synonymous with the Slave Power.

There was a rumor during these years that Annette Gordon-Reed herself was working on a biography of Jefferson. What she has achieved is something else—something more necessary. The post-DNA takedowns of Jefferson shared something very significant with the old defenses. They showed no interest in the Hemingses themselves. They did not really consider slaves and the master as inhabiting the same house, much less the same histories. By refashioning the
story as a family history with the Hemingses at the center, Gordon-Reed has found a way to make the most of the salient not-so-new fact: that Hemingses and Jeffersons were kin.

Obviously, Jefferson is an important part of their story. He shaped their world. Putting aside the question of how much slaves in general or the Hemingses in particular contributed to Jefferson’s mind, his life, his politics, the Hemingses provide a unique opportunity to understand American slavery. This intensive study comes not a moment too late, insofar as Gordon-Reed has been able to build on recent studies that posit the sexual politics of slavery as a constitutive aspect of the regime. Microhistorical studies of particular plantations have become, if anything, state of the art. The strong literature on early Virginia, and Gordon-Reed’s expertise in legal scholarship, are especially germane in the case of Jefferson, a lawyer and statesman who inherited most of his slaves and freed some of the Hemingses in his will: a piece of the evidence that has been one of the Rorschach tests for those who have wondered about the family relationship.

*The Hemingses of Monticello* is at once a social history of a plantation, a woman’s and family history, and a legal history of slavery in Virginia. It does not claim to be a master key to the entire history of slavery in the United States, but it does proceed with an acute awareness of the significance, to Americans, of this case study, and of the specific nature of the case itself. Again and again, Gordon-Reed subtly reexamines American slavery from the perspective of mixed-race people for whom slavery was no less real or horrifying for their sometimes “special” treatment. What emerges is a regime that depended, increasingly, on the public-private distinction, on the phenotypical fiction but legal truth of a color line, and the rules of property in a wider world becoming increasingly hostile to slavery itself. What also emerges is a remarkable story of limited but effective resistance to slavery. Abjuring the temptation to stick close to Jefferson as an exceptional man, Gordon-Reed has in effect brought together some of the most sophisticated and important themes in recent scholarship on slavery, while offering a telling critique of the tendency to separate the story of masters, of politics, of law, and of “founders” from the social history of slavery.5

“The medium of biography is problematic in the context of slavery,” Gordon-Reed reminds the reader, because of the problem with sources—but perhaps also because of the family-based nature of slaves’ lives (p. 83). Neither is social history sufficient—especially if it leads us to miss what individuals did. “For African Americans social history almost invariably overwhelms biography”: context becomes story (if that). Nevertheless, “there is, in fact, no one context to consult in regards to Sally Hemings: she lived many . . . the circle of her mother and siblings, her extended family, the larger enslaved community at Monticello, her community in Paris, his white family, and, finally, her own children” (pp. 290–91).
Sarah (Sally) Hemings was the youngest child of John Wayles and Elizabeth Hemings, who was the daughter of an African woman and a sea captain. Wayles was a well-connected lawyer who started out with nothing but was very much involved in the slave trade. He took Elizabeth as his concubine after the death of his third wife. They had six children, including Sally in 1773, at a time when Thomas Jefferson was courting Martha Wayles, herself a widow.

“People are prone to have sex,” especially when their elders and spouses are not around to object, but the law of slavery critically shaped the decisions made by Hemings women and their masters (p. 81). Virginia statutes outlawed interracial marriage, not sex. The law enabled and obscured masters’ paternity of slave children, giving them considerable flexibility in the process. Thomas Jefferson inherited the Hemingses and a positive attitude toward the family, whom Martha chose to have around rather than rejecting as a threat to her identity or inheritance (and why not, when they were a valuable part of her inheritance). Gordon-Reed carefully introduces at several junctures the cautionary tale of what happened to white children’s prospects when their widowed fathers or mothers remarried and produced more legitimate offspring. According to Hemings family sources—and who else was there to know?—when Martha lay on her deathbed she made Jefferson promise not to remarry, no doubt thinking of her daughters as much as her love for her husband. That her pregnancies contributed to her early death only gave her more moral authority as the force that shaped the family. From the beginning, the Hemingses—Martha’s half-siblings among them—were treated as special by Jefferson. They were trained as artisans, kept out of the fields, and taught to read. Where others see extreme hypocrisy, taking Jefferson’s famously negrophobic comments in Notes on the State of Virginia as a reflection of his unchanging, unambiguous racial “thought,” Gordon-Reed sees shades of meaning. Were the Hemingses in a special category because of their Wayles genes and their lighter skin? Certainly. Does this make Jefferson more of a racist? Perhaps. But there is much more to the story. Gordon-Reed presents a compelling picture of a devastated Jefferson who clung all the more to the family: not only his daughters, but the Hemingses who were themselves Wayles kin. He made them his most essential servants. Rather than preferring them to be invisible even as they catered to his every whim, as his use of the famous Monticello dumbwaiter suggests of his attitudes toward slaves, he wanted to be surrounded by at least some of them. The Hemingses were taught his favorite skills: carpentry, music, cookery. When he went to Paris, he took James Hemings for the purpose of training him to be a French chef.

When Sally also was sent over, not according to Jefferson’s direction but to accompany twelve-year-old daughter Maria Jefferson (who did not wish to go), Jefferson soon became a Virginia stock character: the widower disinclined to marry and attracted to a servant girl who probably looked like his late wife.
In Parisian society such liaisons were hardly dangerous. Teenage women of Sally’s age regularly married older men, both in France and America. Sally was now in precisely the position her mother had been in vis-à-vis John Wayles. Because of that family background, Sally was extraordinarily “well suited to perform the personal” duties of a wife for Jefferson, without any of the public or legal risks of a second marriage. It was the “inverse of a social marriage”: private, and not a legal marriage at all, yet probably intimate in ways we’ll never know. Little wonder that Jefferson dwelled, in a letter to Maria Cosway, on a painting of Sarah delivering Hagar to Abraham (pp. 282–83).

Gordon-Reed argues for Sally’s agency—or can we just say, human perspective?—and sets the stage for it by positing a liberating Parisian experience. Jefferson could hardly have played up his slave mastery in Paris in the late 1780s, where as a foreigner he was supposed to actually register his slaves. He could have easily lost them through a legal process had he done so. So he did not. Instead, he paid the Hemingses top wages, and they blended into the increasingly audacious Parisian servant class. If Jefferson was living out a patriarchal fantasy that would shape the rest of his life, James and Sally were becoming cosmopolitans and learning that they had a special chance to negotiate. Gradually, Gordon-Reed argues, they decided, perhaps together, to return to America with the Jeffersons on the condition of eventual freedom for James and for Sally’s future children (she was pregnant by the time of their return in 1789).

What is astounding here, and revealing about the gap between prior Jefferson studies and the historiography of slavery, is that for all the debates about slave agency, no one as far as I can tell has thought to see Sally Hemings in terms of such a seemingly remarkable (yet for the period, typical) exercise of agency. Through her private liaison with Jefferson, Hemings became a maternal emancipator: she freed her descendants and some of her siblings. On the basis of the Hemings reminiscences and a focus on what these individuals actually did, Gordon-Reed also bucks the current trend toward Jefferson bashing and suggests a Hemings family that found Jefferson to be trustworthy and were rewarded. They got special status and, for some, emancipation. What he got out of it was a private world of intimacy and kin: of slaves who could be conceived of as not enemies but as women and children, who would never leave, at least not during his lifetime.

How these Hemingses actually felt about the Jeffersons from day to day is beside the point—but only to a point. They probably felt ambivalent: angry and loyal by turns, privileged as they were relatively speaking, deeply resentful at the emotional as well as material benefits that Jefferson wrested from the system he himself decried. Hence Gordon-Reed’s extended critique, at the center of the book, of the idea that the Jefferson-Hemings sexual connection must have been rape because consent under slavery is impossible. The “no possible consent” rule erases all individuality and thus dignity. It mimics
mastery’s stereotypes of slaves. Even worse, she writes, it associates black women with degraded sex. Gordon-Reed by contrast argues that Hemings needs to be seen as a young woman in a patriarchal society who made some strikingly common, rather than exceptional, choices. Especially after she chose to return (most likely aware that no French law would force her to go back to America), Jefferson was in “moral debt” to her. She may also have been aware that under Virginia law, her children would in fact be legally white. In any case, Hemings knew a private Jefferson we will never know, in part because she did know him. From this time, references to Sally virtually disappear from Jefferson family correspondence—as do his elder daughter Martha’s letters to him. Martha rushed into an ill-fated marriage with her cousin Tom Randolph very soon after the return to Virginia, only to see her father-in-law marry a seventeen-year-old childhood friend who proceeded to have children and cost Tom Randolph the family fortune. “There but for the grace of God—and Sally Hemings” went Martha (p. 431).

Did they love each other? This was the happy “multicultural fantasy” put forward by Fawn Brodie and novelist Barbara Chase-Riboud and broadcast in the television miniseries Sally Hemings: An American Scandal (1999). Gordon-Reed has an answer. The idea of their love does not change the basic inhumanity of slavery: “the romance is in thinking that it makes any difference if they did.” It was all about the property. Jefferson was the quintessential old southern paternalist, for better and worse incapable of separating his affection for the land from slavery, from family, from his duty and interest in his children (of whatever color). He imagined himself as a reformer of slavery, and Monticello an ascent from the fields, where Hemings boys would work in a nailery that would itself build the house, make profits, and help phase out tobacco-raising drudgery. The rest of the compelling narrative details the consequences for the Hemingses (and Jeffersons) over the next several decades. Some of the Hemings men adapted well to a special status; others, especially James Hemings, chafed at the bonds. The revelations in the Richmond press in 1801 and 1802 made it clear that a strict boundary would be kept between Monticello and the rest of the world. These events coincided, tellingly, with James Hemings’s suicide. Everything Jefferson would do, publicly and privately, with respect to slaves and slavery would be carefully calibrated and designed to deflect attention away from the seeming gap between his published criticisms of the institution and his deeply imbricated domestic life. He’d become politically toothless with respect to slavery. He had a comforting retirement, surrounded by family in multiple senses, which gave him the energy to keep thinking, corresponding, politicking, and building the University of Virginia. His slaves had more work than ever at the Monticello hive; but a few of them, the ones closely related to him, had prospects they might not otherwise have had.

Among the many interpretive moves that distinguish this superlative book is its refusal merely to repeat or deepen a catalogue of Jeffersonian hypocrisies.
If Jefferson is only a hypocrite and a racist, the Hemingses will likely be only victims—or stooges. Moreover, if Jefferson’s words or the absence of them are read as the main evidence of his ideas and feelings, and not contextualized in relation to both public and private actions, the result is inevitably superficial as both biography and history. Rethinking both Jeffersons and Hemingses as members of a family, each deeply shaped by gender roles, the rules of property, and the changing politics of slavery on two continents adds an unforeseen depth and complexity to the Monticello drama. Not least, it explains the rest of the Hemings family history. Most of the descendants of Elizabeth Hemings were sold with the estate after Jefferson’s death. For them, after decades, the privileges of distant relation were temporary; the law of slavery proved the most powerful force in their lives. On the other hand, “what Jefferson accomplished for his children was what he said was impossible for the country”: emancipation, blending, and the memory of a past at once ironic and tragic (p. 653).


2. These included the character defense (it wouldn’t have been like Jefferson to have sex with his slave); the irrelevancy defense (it doesn’t really matter); and the agnostic defense (we’ll never know the truth so let’s just move on). For overviews of the debate, see Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers, “The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson: Race and Slavery in American Memory,” in Jeffersonian Legacies, ed. Peter S. Onuf (1993), 418–56; and Francis D. Cogliano, Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy (2006), chap. 6.