WHAT WE THINK ABOUT WHEN WE THINK ABOUT THOMAS JEFFERSON

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Thomas Jefferson is America's most protean historical figure. His meaning is ever-changing and ever-changeable. And in the years since his death in 1826, his symbolic legacy has varied greatly. Because he was literally present at the creation of the Declaration of Independence that is forever linked with him, so many elements of subsequent American life—good and bad—have always attached to Jefferson as well.

For a quarter of a century—as an undergraduate, then a graduate student, and now as a professor of early American history—I have grappled with understanding Jefferson. If I have a pretty good handle on the other prominent founders and can grasp the essence of Washington, Madison, Hamilton, Adams and others (even the famously opaque Franklin), I have never been able to say the same of Jefferson. But at least I am in good company. Jefferson biographer Merrill Peterson, who spent a scholarly lifetime devoted to studying him, noted that of his contemporaries Jefferson was "the hardest to sound to the depths of being," and conceded, famously, "It is a mortifying confession but he remains for me, finally, an impenetrable man." This in the preface to a thousand page biography! Peterson's successor as Thomas Jefferson Foundation Professor at Mr. Jefferson's University of Virginia, Peter S. Onuf, has noted the difficulty of knowing how to think about Jefferson

once we sift through the reams of evidence and confesses "as I always do when pressed, that I am 'deeply conflicted.'"[1] The more I read, learn, write, and teach about Jefferson, the more puzzled and conflicted I remain, too.

And this condition is not limited to historians but, it seems, to Americans generally. When we look at Jefferson staring out at us from Mount Rushmore and gaze upon the fittingly elegant Jefferson Memorial, what do we see? What meaning do we impart to him? What do we need him to symbolize or to represent for us? What do we need him to be? And does Jefferson mean the same thing to all of us? Can he? [2]

My goal in this essay is to think out loud about Jefferson, who has aptly been called "America's essentially contested statesman."[3] By clarifying my own thinking on Jefferson and by tracing and analyzing what others have thought and written, I hope to offer some broader answers to the question implied by my title. In short, I will venture some conclusions as to how "we" think about the man from Monticello.

Jefferson's reputation has ebbed and flowed through the years in what one scholar calls "the familiar academic boom-and-bust cycle," usually in counterpoise to Alexander Hamilton's

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[1] Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation* (New York, 1970), p. viii; Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville, 2000), p. 3.

[2] I confess upfront that the "we" of my title is problematic. It might imply that there is only a singular "we" and a singular meaning. This trope was quite common in historical works several generations ago when scholars wrote blithely of "the American Mind," or "Americans," or "men," or "us," or "we," in a sweeping and unexamined universal declaration, intended to include everyone when what they really meant was middle- or upper-class white males. These hoary pronouncements took no account of subject position, point of view or identity, or the vast and multifaceted differences that have always existed among classes, races, and genders and that render the concept of a single "American mind" impossible. By contrast, the "we" of my title is plural and refers to multiple "we's" and multiple interpretations of Jefferson. For a broader consideration of some of these questions and about the founding generation, including but not limited to Jefferson, see R.B. Bernstein's thoughtful book, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (New York, 2009).

[3] Alan Gibson, "Being Thomas Jefferson," *William & Mary Quarterly* 3d. series 67 (2010), 572–579, quotation at 578.

reputation.[4] Just as the two rivals battled constantly for a dozen years until Hamilton's death in 1804, they have also been linked in history and memory. Jefferson was hailed either as an advocate of nationalism at a time of westward expansion prior to the Civil War or as a proponent of state sovereignty or even secession. The outcome of the Civil War coupled with the fact of his slave ownership drove Jefferson's reputation to its lowest levels during the late 19th century. Not only were his ideas on states' rights and slavery repulsive, Jefferson's advocacy of an agrarian republic seemed remote, quaint, and irrelevant in an age marked by the growth of cities, industry, and corporations. Jefferson's reputation plummeted just as Hamilton's soared. But just as the Civil War crushed Jefferson's reputation, the 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression, coupled with the Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency and the political climate it ushered in, dealt a body blow to Hamilton's status. Jefferson was restored, hailed as a man of the people and their defender against the malefactors of wealth circa the 1790s. Roosevelt consciously governed as a Jeffersonian and, as many historians have noted, used Hamiltonian means (strong executive, powerful central government) to achieve Jeffersonian ends (greater economic and political power for ordinary Americans).[5]

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[4] Sean Wilentz, "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Thomas Jefferson," *The New Republic* 216 (March 10, 1997), 32–42, quotation at p. 32.

[5] See Peterson, *Jefferson's Image in the American Mind* for a thoughtful discussion of how Jefferson's image and reputation have changed over time. For a similar consideration of Hamilton's cyclical reputation see Stephen F. Knott, *Alexander Hamilton and the Persistence of Myth* (Lawrence, Kansas 2002). For an updating of Jefferson's reputation through the years with a particular focus on the way Jefferson himself sought to craft a legacy for future generations see Francis D. Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy* (Charlottesville, 2006). Several other articles and book chapters provide excellent updated considerations of subsequent Jefferson scholarship and take the story of Jefferson's evolving reputation down to the present. See Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers, "The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson: Race and Slavery in American Memory, 1943–1993," in Peter S. Onuf (ed.), *Jeffersonian Legacies* (Charlottesville, 1993), pp. 418–456; Sean Wilentz, "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Thomas Jefferson,"; Peter S. Onuf and Jan Ellen Lewis, "American Synecdoche: Thomas Jefferson as Image, Icon, Character, Self," *American Historical Review* 103 (1998), 125–136; Jeffrey L. Pasley, "Poli-

Once the Jeffersonian resurgence gathered momentum, it grew decisively. Jefferson biographer Richard B. Bernstein has noted that in the period from World War II forward, "Jefferson acquired his five monuments," each coming in rapid and reinforcing succession. The first came in 1938 when the U.S. Mint changed from the Indian head nickel to a new design featuring Jefferson's image on the face and Monticello on the back. Next came the completion of Mount Rushmore in 1941, where Jefferson's visage (and by extension, his mark of greatness) was confirmed in sculpture where he joined Washington, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt to form the pantheon of greats. On the 1943 bicentennial of Jefferson's birth, President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated the elegant new Jefferson Memorial in the nation's capital. The fourth and fifth monuments were literary. In 1948 Dumas Malone published the first number of his six-volume biography of Jefferson, a project not completed until 1981. And in 1950, Princeton University launched the *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* documentary editing project, one designed as the showpiece of a new initiative that put the words of the founders in the hands of students, scholars, and library readers alike. In both scholarly circles and with the broader public, Jefferson's iconic image—on coins, on monuments, in literature—seemed fixed.[6]

I first encountered this reading of Jefferson when, in the mid-1980s as a diligent young history major, I asked one of my professors for summer reading recommendations on Jefferson. He suggested Gilbert Chinard's 1929 book *Thomas Jefferson, The Apostle of Americanism.* I read it and liked it, as it conformed to my then very high opinion of Jefferson. I didn't

tics and the Misadventures of Thomas Jefferson's Modern Reputation: A Review Essay," in *Journal of Southern History* 72 (2006), 871–908; and Onuf, "Making Sense of Jefferson," in Onuf (ed.), *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, 2007), pp. 19–49.

[6] R. B. Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 2003), pp. 193–194. For an excellent condensed summary of the four stages of twists and turns in Jefferson's public image (which Cogliano borrows for his book) see Bernstein's Epilogue (pp. 191–198).

know it at the time (although I would soon learn that the publication date and sub-title should have been dead giveaways) but Chinard's book reflected—actually, slightly anticipated—a particular historiographical trend that saw Jefferson as a heroic, larger-than-life figure who bent the nation in his direction and, in the process, created the "Americanism" that came to mark the country. In doing so, Chinard revived the central proposition of the earlier Jeffersonian biographer, James Parton, who in 1874 made the bold declaration: "If Jefferson was wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right." Chinard reaffirmed Parton's assertion of the link between Jeffersonianism and Americanism and also helped usher in a wave of strongly pro-Jeffersonian sentiments, both in the academy and among the public.[7]

But inevitably scholarship took yet another turn, leading to a reversal of fortunes for both Jefferson and Hamilton. Partly because scholars now had access to Jefferson's papers, they began to probe them and examine Jefferson's thoughts and actions closely. His words were combed for inconsistencies with his actions and, in the wake of the civil rights era, Jefferson's record on slavery, on Native Americans, on women, on civil liberties all came in for special criticism. John Chester Miller sharply criticized Jefferson's inconsistencies of words and deeds on slavery; Paul Finkelman excoriated the whole founding generation and Jefferson in particular for their hypocrisy.[8]

Other scholars dared to criticize, even mock, Jefferson head on. Richard K. Matthews argued that Jefferson's political thought was marked by genuinely radical ideas about democracy and government in a book in which Jefferson came off as

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[7] Chinard, Thomas Jefferson, *The Apostle of Americanism* (Boston, 1929). See Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960) for a superb cultural history of Jefferson's image from his lifetime through the mid-20th century. Peterson discusses Chinard on pp. 411–418.

[8] John Chester Miller, *The Wolf By the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (New York, 1977); Paul Finkelman, "Jefferson and Slavery: 'Treason Against the Hopes of the World,'" in Onuf (ed.), *Jeffersonian Legacies* (Charlottesville, 1993), pp. 181–221.

wacky and wild-eyed. But Matthews's Jefferson was positively tame compared to the send-up he received from Conor Cruise O'Brien. O'Brien did what all undergraduate history majors are taught never to do: take a passage of someone's writing, wrench it entirely out of context, and then make it represent the essence of that person's thinking. Extrapolating from some of Jefferson's musings about revolution, O'Brien turned Jefferson into a bloodthirsty murderer who was the lineal ancestor, he contended, of the Ku Klux Klan, Cambodian mass murderer Pol Pot, and Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh. O'Brien's work, however shoddy, nevertheless marked the culmination of a generation of decidedly negative treatments of Jefferson that reached their apogee by the end of the 20th century.[9]

The most important factor in reshaping Jefferson's image, however, has been the long saga of Jefferson and Sally Hemings, an enslaved person owned by Jefferson and about whom speculation has existed publicly since 1802 when a disgruntled journalist and office-seeker charged that Jefferson kept Hemings as a concubine and that he had fathered several children with her. While the Sally Hemings story has been around since Jefferson's time, it has moved only gradually from the margins to the center. The Jefferson's family, including his daughter, denied the story at the time and for years afterward and Jefferson biographers denigrated the notion as ridiculous. Two of Jefferson's nephews were put forward instead as the people

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[9] Richard K. Matthews, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson: A Revisionist View* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1984); Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1785–1800* (Chicago, 1996). O'Brien builds his argument on Jefferson's so-called "Adam and Eve" letter to William Short, January 3, 1793 in Merrill D. Peterson (ed.), *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York, 1984), 1003–1006. Jefferson noted that "The liberty of the whole earth" was at stake in the French Revolution and "rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated. Were there but an Adam & an Eve left in every country, & left free, it would be better than as it now is." These are speculative musings of the kind Jefferson made constantly, *not* prescriptive ones as O'Brien thinks. Ever the political realist, Jefferson distanced himself considerably from the French Revolution later in 1793.

most likely to have had sex with Hemings. Most 20th century scholars agreed, mentioning what they called the "legend" only to dismiss it. But from the start, dissenting voices kept the story alive. The first major African American novel, *Clotel, or the President's Daughter,* written by William Wells Brown and published in 1853, publicized the concept and Madison Hemings in an 1870s newspaper interview declared that his mother told him that Jefferson was his father. In short, African-American oral culture persistently kept the story alive in the face of official white denial and dismissal of these accounts.[10]

But as the negative phase of Jeffersonian image-making took hold in the 1960s, the Hemings story gained more traction. Historian Winthrop Jordan (who was white) took the story seriously in his important 1968 book *White Over Black*, and in 1974 historian Fawn Brodie raised the stakes dramatically when her book, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, not only accepted the idea of a Jefferson-Hemings sexual relationship but suggested that it was a mutually loving relationship. Such works only intensified the defensive efforts of Jeffersonian biographers. They attacked Brodie for her use of psychohistory and claimed that the Hemings "legend" could not be true because Jefferson, they insisted without evidence, was simply not the type of person who would do such a thing—what became known to aficionados of the controversy as the "character defense." Still, most historians for whatever reason seemed to doubt the story, or at least believed that the evidence was highly circumstantial and inconclusive.

However, evidence can be read in many ways and in 1997 legal scholar Annette Gordon-Reed published a path-breaking book of historical research and detective work that traced the full historical record and the different ways that the evidence in this case was evaluated. Gordon-Reed traced the existing evidence, compared the accounts of Hemings family members to

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[10] These paragraphs follow Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, pp. 194–197 and Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson*, pp. 170–179. See also French and Ayers, "The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson" for a fuller treatment.

accounts of Jefferson family members, and evaluated what historians had done with these pieces over the years. She found that the evidence, much of it circumstantial, nonetheless fit with the accounts of Hemings's family. Gordon-Reed pointed out that historians (most all of them white) consistently privileged the accounts of Jefferson family members over comparable accounts from Hemings family members. Damningly, she exposed the hidden assumptions that often seemed to have guided historians: that enslaved people, formerly enslaved people, and African-Americans in general were not reliable sources but that white people were; that Sally Hemings may have been promiscuous but that Jefferson was not; that oral history is always suspect but that written records rarely are. At the same time, she patiently reconstructed the records and found a persistent pattern: every time Jefferson visited Monticello (he was away for much of the 1790s and 1800s), Hemings gave birth a few months afterward. She "never conceived a child when Jefferson was not in residence" and "only conceived when Jefferson was at Monticello." Most damning of all was the fact that none of this evidence was new. The information Gordon-Reed used had been available to the previous scholars who denied even the possibility of a Hemings-Jefferson relationship but who, as she concluded, "have never made a serious objective attempt to get to the truth of this matter."[11]

Gordon-Reed did *not* argue that Jefferson and Hemings indisputably had a sexual relationship or that Jefferson fathered her children. But she demonstrated that the evidence, while inconclusive, could just as easily be read to suggest as much. Gordon-Reed's book was as careful and judicious as Conor Cruise O'Brien's was sloppy and reckless.[12] And her case was far more devastating as a result. Actually, Gordon-Reed took an

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[11] Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville, 1997), p. 216; p. 224. See Wilentz, "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Thomas Jefferson" for an appreciative assessment of the book.

[12] Indeed, the two books could be taught side by side to show students how to—and how not to—do historical research.

agnostic position, declining to go where the evidence did not exist. But it was readily apparent from her work that no scholar yet had built as powerful a case exposing the lengths to which the Jefferson defenders had gone to protect Jefferson's image and the ways they had systematically ignored or dismissed evidence based on its source and not its veracity. Her work also suggested the strong probability of a Jefferson-Hemings relationship. In the true model of a paradigm shift, Gordon-Reed laid bare the hidden assumptions of previous scholars and cleared away the dead brush of the old idea, making way for the new.

Then came the closest thing to a smoking gun anyone was likely to see. In 1998 a British science journal released the results of a DNA test conducted with samples obtained from the direct male line of descent of five males: Jefferson's uncle; Sally Hemings's youngest son, Eston; Jefferson's nephews Samuel and Peter Carr (often put forward as the likely fathers of Hemings's children); and another slave (Thomas Woodson) who belonged to Jefferson and whose family had long insisted that he had been the first son of Jefferson and Hemings. The results concluded that Woodson was not a descendent of Jefferson, that the Carrs could not have been the father of Eston Hemings, but that Eston had been fathered by a male in Jefferson's family. And the very strong probability was that the male member of Jefferson's family had been Thomas Jefferson himself. These results, while not 100% conclusive, nonetheless seemed to confirm all the longstanding circumstantial evidence and, in the wake of Gordon-Reed's book, prompted a sea-change in the minds of many historians and Jeffersonian scholars. The "legend" many had long derided, dismissed, or ignored, was, it seemed, true. Jefferson and Hemings had had at least one child together.[13]

What historians have done since is interesting. To be clear, the DNA findings did not "prove" that Jefferson was the father

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[13] This paragraph draws on the excellent short discussions in Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, p. 196 and Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson*, pp. 177–179.

of Sally Hemings's youngest son. But it excluded virtually every one else who might have been and, when combined with the evidence in Gordon-Reed about the dates of Jefferson's presence at Monticello and the dates Hemings gave birth, pointed squarely and unambiguously to Thomas Jefferson himself. While a few scholars seized on the lack of iron-clad certainty to challenge the findings and assert that the case was far from proved, this seemed more a rear-guard action after the battle was lost than a major counterargument.[14]

But for most scholars, the results brought about a sea-change in their thinking. They accepted the DNA findings as being as determinative as we were likely to see and revised their opinions and their lecture notes to reflect the new evidence. Even many who had been skeptical of the Jefferson-Hemings connection previously recanted and declared themselves persuaded. Mainstream acceptance was further indicated when the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation that operates Monticello appointed a commission to study the story in the light of the new findings and issued a report declaring that the DNA research was valid, that the "best evidence available" showed a "high probability" that Jefferson fathered Eston Hemings and that he "most likely" fathered all six of Sally Hemings's children. Those conclusions represented a new scholarly consensus.[15]

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[14] See Cogliano, pp. 179–184 and, more fully, Alexander Boulton, "The Monticello Mystery—Case Continued," in *William & Mary Quarterly* (hereinafter *WMQ*) 3d series 58 (2001), 1039–1046, an excellent review essay that evaluates and casts severe doubts on the evidence, methodology, and claims of those who still persisted in arguing against Jefferson's paternity of Eston Hemings.

[15] Cogliano, pp. 178–179, Boulton, 1039. This new consensus is also reflected in the recent biographical project, *American National Biography*, published in 1999 in print form and on-line and conceived as a new version of the venerable *Dictionary of American Biography* published in the 1930s. See the thoughtful discussion in Scott E. Casper, "Revising the National Pantheon: The *American National Biography* and Early American History," *WMQ* 58 (2001), 449–463. Casper focuses comparatively on the revised treatments of Jefferson and Hemings on pp. 455–459.

Historians next tried to figure out what to do in light of this new consensus. Scholars who had once debated the issue now turned to grappling with its meaning. What did it say about Jefferson? About the relationship between masters and enslaved persons? About American culture and memory? About which stories and memories and accounts of the past have been privileged and accepted and which have been dismissed? Books, articles, and scholarly forums proliferated. In March 1999 the University of Virginia convened a conference and published the results in a collection of essays. The *William & Mary Quarterly* devoted a forum in 2000 to "Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings Redux."[16]

So what do we do with Jefferson now, post-DNA? What do we think about him after a decade or so since the Hemings evidence has had a chance to sink in? What does the new evidence change about our evaluations? Peter Onuf notes that among historians, there has been a movement away from "the vicious circle of celebration and condemnation" that has marked so much of the scholarship.[17] But where do we go from here?

The subsequent scholarship has moved along three tracks, each representing helpful directions. One track has probed more fully Jefferson's personal life, especially the nature of the relationship between Jefferson and Hemings and between Jefferson and his slaves more broadly, raising some fascinating questions. If we know with a fair amount of certainty that Jefferson fathered Hemings's children, we still know little about how they were connected. What kind of relationship did Jefferson and Hemings have? Was it only sexual? Was it rape? Was it a loving, affectionate relationship as Fawn Brodie had first suggested? Was it purely exploitative or were there mutual benefits, such as the grants of freedom by Jefferson to Hemings

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[16] Jan Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf (eds.), *Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture* (Charlottesville, 1999). Note the placement of Hemings's name before Jefferson's. See also "Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings Redux," in *WMQ* 57 (2000), 121–210.

[17] Onuf, "Introduction," in his *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson*, p. 4.

and her children? How did Jefferson relate to both his white family and his black family at Monticello?[18]

A second track of Jefferson scholarship has extended and accelerated a trend that started even pre-DNA, making Jefferson less the single great historical actor and putting him instead more fully in the context of his times, a development that placed him more often to the side of famous events than standing alone out front. Jefferson was an undeniably important person. It is neither possible nor desirable to efface him from the historical record—no matter what Paul Finkelman and Conor Cruise O'Brien might wish. But recent work has suggested that he was not quite as central or instrumental as we once thought. A great example is Pauline Maier's book on the making of the Declaration of Independence. Maier reminds us that the Declaration reflected a bevy of local petitions and resolutions written in towns and counties across the country and sent to the Continental Congress. While the Declaration's words were mostly unique, its ideas were not and reflected the thinking of hundreds and thousands of American colonists struggling to define their rights and their relationship to Great Britain. The Declaration was "not an individual but a collective act that drew on the words and thoughts of many people." Jefferson admitted as much in a letter written late in his life when he stated, "Neither aiming at originality of principles or sentiments, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American

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[18] These and many other fascinating questions are considered in works like Lucia Stanton's, "The Other End of the Telescope: Jefferson Through the Eyes of His Slaves," *WMQ* 57 (2000), 139–152; Lucia Stanton and Dianne Swann-Wright's "Bonds of Memory: Identity and the Hemings Family," in Lewis and Onuf (eds.), *Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson*, pp. 161–183; Jan Ellen Lewis' "The White Jeffersons," in *Ibid.* pp. 127–160. The broader implications for American history and culture are treated in (and his conclusions suggested by the title of) Clarence Walker's *Mongrel Nation: The America Begotten by Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings* (Charlottesville, 2009). The fullest treatment of these themes is found in Annette Gordon-Reed's, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York, 2008), which won the Pulitzer Prize for History.

Mind." But Jefferson himself always called attention to his contribution, famously choosing that accomplishment as one of three to appear on his tombstone, and nearly two hundred years of image-making by biographers and politicians (following Jefferson's lead) had so blurred the historical record, creating the idea of Jefferson penning the immortal words all by himself, and made that concept so indelible that it took Maier's book to put Jefferson back into the context that he himself had stated.[19]

Another famous document long associated with Jefferson were the Kentucky Resolutions, drafted in 1798 for the Kentucky legislature to define its opposition to the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts passed by a Federalist congress earlier in the year. But the latest scholarship here, too, emphasizes not the heroic role of Jefferson alone but rather that Jefferson's resolution was only one among many. Douglas Bradburn has found dozens of local petitions from Virginia, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, New York, Vermont, and New Jersey that showed genuine grassroots anger and opposition. Citizens did not need to be told by Jefferson to oppose the Alien and Sedition laws or what to say about them. Here, too, it was a story, as Pauline Maier put it in discussing the Declaration, of a choir and not a soloist.[20]

My own recent work on Jefferson extends this conclusion. In a chapter commissioned for the *Blackwell Companion to Thomas Jefferson* on Jefferson as political party leader, my essay gave due credit to Jefferson's symbolic leadership of the

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[19] See Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1997), quotation at p. xx; Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825 in Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York, 1984), pp. 1500–1501. Jefferson elaborated by saying that the object of the Declaration was "Not to find new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before: but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent . . . All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right."

[20] Douglas Bradburn, "A Clamor in the Public Mind: Opposition to the Alien and Sedition Acts," in *WMQ* 65 (2008), 565–600.

nascent Democratic-Republican party, to his top-down messaging and direction of some events, and to his long-term strategizing for political success. But it gave equal credit to the newspaper editors who created a partisan press and to the political operatives such as John Beckley who was, in effect, the campaign manager of the Jeffersonian party. It also stressed the rise of grass-roots opposition to the Federalists in the 1790s from ordinary citizens who organized, met, marched, drafted petitions and resolutions, and constituted the true roots of the party. The crucial roles were played by Beckley and the newspaper editors who were the nation's first political professionals and who built a party structure and who provided the vital links between Jefferson and James Madison at the top of the party and the ordinary citizens who comprised the rank and file. My chapter gave Jefferson his due, but the picture I hope readers take away is that Jefferson's party leadership was both shared with, and dependent upon, many others. No soloing in my portrait either.[21]

One of the best illustrations—and one whose focus, in contrast with the others just cited, is mostly personal and not political—of the way Jefferson is now more frequently historicized and fitted into the larger context is found in the brilliant recent book by Annette Gordon-Reed entitled *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*. The title of the book—unthinkable a few short decades ago—says it all and Jefferson, although he is present in some form throughout the book, takes his place alongside the other families who lived and worked at Monticello.

I got a foretaste of what the contextualization and de-privileging of Jefferson looked like as an undergraduate history major myself. When I was a junior, just a few months after I finished reading Chinard's admiring biography, I registered for Bruce Wheeler's class on "Thomas Jefferson and His Age"

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[21] Todd Estes, "Thomas Jefferson as Party Leader," in Frank D. Cogliano (ed.), *A Companion to Thomas Jefferson* (Oxford, England, forthcoming 2011), a volume in the *Blackwell Companions to American History*.

(not the professor who recommended the Chinard book). Wheeler, himself a University of Virginia Ph.D. who studied with Merrill Peterson, emphasized the "Age of Jefferson" far more than Jefferson himself. Attempting to reconstruct the early national period by layers from a social history perspective, Wheeler's class began with a section on "The Rhythms of the Land and the People," which segued into "Everyday Life in the New Nation," followed by "Work, Popular Culture, and the Ideology of the Folk." Not until the last segment of the class, "The Man from Monticello," did we actually get to Jefferson. The effect—startling at the time but now such a common-place for me that it is hard to remember how I ever could have thought otherwise—was to de-center Jefferson and put him in the broad context of early American history in all its multiplicity and complexity. As a result of Wheeler's class, I never saw Jefferson or the early republic in quite the same way again. Wheeler was certainly on the interpretive cutting edge when he taught this class. Much of the Jeffersonian and early national scholarship of the past two decades has provided an underscoring of Wheeler's themes and approach which I, as an impressionable college junior, took to heart.

It was probably this perspective that led to my reaction of unsurprised acceptance when the Hemings DNA evidence came to light in the late 1990s. My sense was that the new evidence did not alter my assessment of Jefferson who I continued to see mostly in political terms and who, thanks to Wheeler's class, I had long-since de-centered and no longer had on a pedestal.

The third track has reexamined the old questions of Jefferson as symbolic figure and whether the Hemings evidence changed anything fundamental about his legacy or not. If we accept the evidence about Hemings but set it beside Jefferson's achievements in public life, does it change anything? Not according to Joseph Ellis. Ellis, who went from skeptic to convert on the Hemings matter, argued that the "historical achievements responsible for Jefferson's prominent place in

the history books" will remain, independent of the DNA evidence. When considering his historical record, Ellis argues, the Hemings news "has no bearing at all . . . does not affect . . . does nothing to erode" the public record Jefferson built. If anything, the DNA matter adds additional emphasis to a feature of Jefferson that Ellis first highlighted in his own 1996 study: Jefferson's remarkable capacity not just for denial but for compartmentalization. "Jefferson created an interior world constructed out of his own ideals into which he retreated whenever those ideals collided with reality," Ellis writes. "To say that he was a dreamer or visionary catches only a piece of the psychological dexterity at work." Ellis believes Jefferson will remain "the great American Everyman" on whom we can all project our own meanings and interpretations. Rather than revealing a truer or fuller Jefferson, the post-DNA considerations only make clear that Jefferson "is more a sphinx than ever before."[22]

Or should we—rather than disaggregating the private and public Jeffersons—try to put the two together to find a complete Jefferson? Yes, says Peter Onuf. He argues that "the great value of "historicizing Jefferson—of putting him in his proper place and time—is that it enables us to bridge the gap between private and public, practice and profession, that Jefferson himself took such pains to cultivate." In other words, by integrating instead of segregating the private and public Jeffersons, we can, Onuf suggests, tear down those walls of self-constructed denial and compartmentalization behind which Jefferson longed to obscure himself, sphinx-like in Ellis's formulation. Onuf, in a careful reading of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia,* shows how Jefferson's own personal experience with miscegenation may have informed his public political writings on that subject as well as slavery and colonization projects. Onuf sees a much clearer connection between Jefferson's private be-

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[22] Ellis, "Jefferson: Post-DNA," *WMQ* 57 (2000), 125–138, quotations at 127, 131, 136, 138. Ellis's earlier study of Jefferson was *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1996).

havior at Monticello and his public political thought than some other scholars.[23]

But still other historians like Jeffrey Pasley, Joyce Appleby, and Gordon Wood believe that an excessive focus on the personal character issues has obscured what ultimately is Jefferson's most important legacy: his championing of democracy. Pasley argued that placing the Hemings story as "the centerpiece of the Jefferson story," combined with a professional turn away from political history in the academy, "considerably narrowed Thomas Jefferson as a historical figure." Jefferson was seen less and less as a revolutionary thinker, a champion of political democracy, or a preeminent social reformer and more and more as primarily a slaveholder who had a long-term sexual relationship with one of his slaves resulting in children. This, Pasley believes, is unfortunate because it turns Jefferson's life and career (which was vast, varied, and lengthy) into little more than a tale of personal character in which he is found terribly wanting. What we need to do, he argues, is not make character the sole focus. When we do so, what emerges is a picture of Jefferson that recognizes him as his early national contemporaries (both sympathetic Democratic Republicans and hostile Federalists) did: as a champion of democracy, and of ordinary Americans fighting against entrenched elites and a culture of deference. Jefferson's hugely significant championing of democratic political and social reforms is precisely what made him so popular with many ordinary Americans and so feared and reviled by some elites. Recognizing this Jefferson, a figure too easily lost in the character-driven focus on Jefferson and slavery alone, is, Pasley believes, critical to understanding his proper historical significance both in his own time and in ours.[24]

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[23] Onuf, "Introduction," in *Mind of Thomas Jefferson*, p. 5; and Onuf, "Every Generation Is an 'Independent Nation': Colonization, Miscegenation, and the Fate of Jefferson's Children," *WMQ* 57 (2000), 153–170. And see Alan Gibson's very perceptive comments on Onuf's approach to, and interpretations of, Jefferson in his "Being Thomas Jefferson" review essay cited in note 3 above.

[24] Pasley, "Politics and the Misadventures of Thomas Jefferson's Modern Reputation," quotation at 885.

It is fashionable to say that Jefferson was a man of contradictions. But according to Joyce Appleby, that is both too facile and simplistic and also somewhat inaccurate. Appleby, one of the history profession's most decorated practitioners, has returned regularly to the topic of Jefferson over the course of her career, culminating in a thoughtful 2003 biography of the third president that brought together and refined many of her previous writings on the topic.[25]

Summing up her long years of study on the topic, Appleby writes that Jefferson "was not a man of contradictions so much as a person with rarely paired qualities." This notion of "rarely paired qualities" deserves some elaboration:

> A true visionary, he possessed the skills of a first-class administrator. Deeply influenced by the cultivated traditions of Europe's enlightened elite, he expended his political efforts on common men. A talented amateur in botany, paleontology, and architecture, Jefferson was a consummate professional in law, public policy, and party politics. Wide-ranging in both practical and philosophical interests, he also had the tenacity to follow a project through decades to completion. Despite his vaunted tolerance, he remained deeply committed to the superiority of the white race, the male sex, and the civilized heritage of Europe. Ordinary white men were the beneficiaries of his liberating programs; blacks, women, and Indians did not engage the play of his reforming imagination.[26]

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[25] Some of Appleby's key articles and book chapters on Jefferson include "What Is Still American in the Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson?", *WMQ,* 39 (1982), 287–309; "Jefferson and His Complex Legacy," in Onuf (ed.), *Jeffersonian Legacies*, pp. 1–16; "Thomas Jefferson and the Psychology of Democracy," in James Horn et. al. (eds.), *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic* (Charlottesville, 2002), pp. 155–172; "Without Resolution: The Jeffersonian Tension in American Nationalism," in Appleby, *A Restless Past: History and the American Public* (Lanham, Maryland, 2005), pp. 19–39 (this essay is revised from Appleby's Harmsworth Inaugural Lecture delivered in April 1991 at Oxford University).

[26] Appleby, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 2003), pp. 149–150.

Appleby, like Pasley, also believes that Jefferson's greatest achievement was to push for greater democracy and participatory politics (at least for white males). Appleby emphasizes that this represented a revolutionary break with the past even if it seems extremely limited and retrograde to us today. Aware of the limitations of Jefferson's democratic leanings, Appleby nonetheless sees them as essential to his historical role. "What [the American electorate] evidently wanted they got: a leader who believed in their capacity to govern themselves and would liberate ordinary white men from the thrall of their social superiors," she writes. And what Jefferson helped set in motion was continued by others later, contradictions and all. Jefferson's ideas "are implicated in too many currents of our national life, past and present" for them to be forgotten or shoved aside. "Jefferson's simultaneous endorsement of human equality and racial inequality allowed generations of Americans to claim democratic virtues while ignoring civil rights abuses that undermined those virtues." Still, it was Jefferson who helped bring about a democratic social and political world in the United States, even with all its contradictions. As Appleby nicely puts it, Jefferson "fitted democratic mores into the country's new political framework, tongue, and groove." And that, properly understood and contextualized, was no small feat.[27]

Gordon S. Wood concurs that Jefferson's advocacy of democracy is the key to understanding him, stating "no one has embodied America's democratic ideals and democratic hopes more than Thomas Jefferson." Jefferson was also extremely optimistic about the future of democracy and about the future itself, believing the young nation to be on the verge of greatness. Not for nothing had Jefferson written to John Adams in 1816 that he preferred "the dreams of the future better than the history of the past." But as Wood notes, "His expectations always outran reality," and Jefferson's outsized dreams and hopes were bound to end in disappointment. "In

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[27] Appleby, *Thomas Jefferson*, quotations at pp. 30, 134, 146.

the end Jefferson was victimized by his overweening confidence in the people and by his naïve hopefulness in the future." As much as Jefferson consistently advocated democracy, he was often frustrated and disappointed by the choices Americans made, politically and otherwise. People did not always live up to his expectations or reflect the Enlightenment growth he foresaw. In short, Wood's Jefferson was a great democrat who was disappointed by much about American democracy.[28]

Jefferson, despite his clear sympathies and his track record, always remained—in the spirit of Appleby's "rarely paired qualities"—an elitist democrat, or a democratic elitist. Even as he worked with common-man newspaper editors and political lieutenants like John Beckley to further a democratic (and Democratic) political agenda, he kept them at arm's length socially, revealing a personal discomfort with the very thing he advocated politically.[29]

More than anything else, however, we remember Jefferson for his words as much or more than his deeds. Sometimes, as in the immortal Declaration of Independence, they were one and the same. Jefferson *is* Jefferson in large part because of his words, because of his felicitous skill with language. And the power of Jefferson's words, more than any limitations in his own personal life and actions, are what give rise to the aspirational part of Jefferson's appeal. Biographer Richard Bernstein succinctly notes "Whatever we think of Jefferson as a person or as a politician, we can never take away from him his remarkable gift as a writer or his ultimate claims to fame... His words mean not only what he might have intended them to mean, but also what succeeding generations of American have read into them."[30]

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[28] Wood, "The Trials and Tribulations of Thomas Jefferson," in Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York, 2006), pp. 93–117, quotations at pp. 93, 114.

[29] See the discussion in Jeffrey L. Pasley, "'Journeyman, Either in Law or Politics': John Beckley and the Social Origins of Political Campaigning," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16 (1996), 531–569.

[30] Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, p. 198.

As Bernstein suggested, there is something uncontained and uncontainable in Jefferson's words. The aspirational language itself cannot be boxed in, and gave rise to hopes and aspirations long after Jefferson's death; indeed, down to the present day. It is no accident that historians and literary critics have been drawn to Jefferson's writings since his is the first great voice of American democracy, with all of its limitations, contradictions, and tensions but also with all of its hopes, dreams, and aspirations.[31] Some of the most insightful recent work on the American founding and the early republic has focused on language and the power of words—and not only Jefferson's. Early American writing—fiction as well as the non-fiction public writings—repays the close study it has been receiving from scholars.[32]

Not surprisingly, Jefferson's words have a primacy among studies of early American writing. Showing his brilliant command of language, Jefferson used words to illuminate but also to obfuscate. He could sketch grand vistas and spectacular word portraits, but he could also write his way out of any tension, contradiction, or unpleasant reality. For Jefferson also, there was a special relationship between written and oral language. Jay Fliegelman argued that Jefferson crafted the Declaration as

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[31] My thanks to Andrea Knutson who helped me see Jefferson as being in a line that leads to the nation's later great writers on democracy, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman.

[32] Excellent studies abound from a variety of perspectives. See, for starters, John Howe, *Language and Political Meaning in Revolutionary America* (Amherst, Mass. 2004); Sandra M. Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill, 2000); Nancy Ruttenberg, *Democratic Personality: Popular Voice and the Trial of American Authorship* (Stanford, 1998); Christopher Looby, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (Chicago, 1996). On related matters, for an illuminating discussion of the different ways historians and literary critics read each other's work and review each other's books, see Eric Slauter, "History, Literature, and the Atlantic World," *WMQ* 65 (2008), 135–186. For an excellent forum on the relationships between the disciplines of literary history and history and the respective ways they study the past, see the special issue, guest edited by Sandra M. Gustafson, "Political Writing and Literature, 1800–1835," in *Journal of the Early Republic* 30 (2010), 171–300.

both an oral and a written document; that is, as a production intended to be heard by the ear as well as seen with the eye. Historians and literary critics have long distinguished between, and worked with, both written and oral sources. One of the great ironies of the Hemings-Jefferson business is that in the end, as Joseph Ellis reminds us, "The oral tradition in the Hemings family has proven more reliable than the written record on the white side of the Jefferson family." It may take awhile but language really does prove itself to be uncontainable.[33]

Jefferson's most uncontainable words about democracy have become a common inheritance, loosed of whatever restrictions or exceptions he may have intended. If Jefferson once had very particular meanings in mind when he used words like "equality," "liberty," and even "all men," those and other phrases have long since acquired more general, universal meanings. It was Jefferson's words that articulated the hopes and aspirations of all those who have longed for inclusion and opportunity, for rights and for power; in short, his words have always spoken for those who sought to participate in American democracy. And as Sean Wilentz nicely puts it, "over the centuries, more and more Americans have also ridden the ride of which Jefferson dreamed."[34]

Of course, the "ride of which Jefferson dreamed" was democracy, which has proven to be as messy and contradictory as Jefferson himself. His life combined all the tensions, pressures, and contradictions of democracy. He embodied what became the primary pressure point of American politics: the link between democracy and slavery; specifically, the way that growing democracy for white males was joined with—and was even dependent upon—black slavery. This tension split Jefferson's

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[33] Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, 1993); Ellis, "Jefferson: Post-DNA," 133. On Jefferson's skillful use of the personal letter to forge political ties under the guise of friendship, see the insightful chapter on Jefferson in Andrew S. Trees, *The Founding Fathers: The Politics of Character* (Princeton, 2004), pp. 13–43.

[34] Wilentz, "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Thomas Jefferson," p. 42.

Democratic party into pro- and anti-slavery elements, an untenable amalgam that ultimately divided the nation itself in 1861.[35]

Today, more than any other founder, Jefferson's words and ideas are scrutinized for what they may still have to say to 21st-century Americans concerned about extending or restoring democracy. But when scholars try to get too specific in applying Jeffersonian theory to the present day, they invariably run aground on this truth: Jeffersonianism has always worked best in the abstract, at the level of generality and not particularity. Thus, a recent effort to find modern relevance in Jefferson produced an interesting but failed result. The *American Quarterly*, the flagship journal of the American Studies Association, published a forum on the applicability of Jeffersonian democracy to the present. In the lead essay, Michael Hardt, a literary critic at Duke University, proposed to "read Jefferson as a political *thinker*" (Hardt's emphasis) with the object being "not to recover the real Jefferson and his true intentions but rather to ask what his thought can do for us today." In the course of his imaginative but ultimately problematic essay, Hardt drew on the political theorist (and Hardt's sometime coauthor) Antonio Negri and, in his conclusion, offered a bold new "Jeffersonian" formula for global democratic government: "democracy=singularity+autonomy+resistance+constituent power."[36]

But the problem is readily apparent. To get to this conceptual view of democracy, Hardt has to leave Jefferson by the wayside pretty quickly. Jefferson certainly never wrote or spoke in such terms himself and it would be a stretch to argue that he thought in such notions either. Second, and more fundamentally, Jefferson's conception of democracy did not aim at full social or economic equality, nor did it envision freedom for all.

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[35] The long-term unsustainability of a half-slave, half-free democracy is a central theme of Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005).

[36] Michael Hardt, "Jefferson and Democracy," in *American Quarterly* 59 (March 2007), 41–78; quotations at pp. 43 and 73.

Hardt's theoretical Jefferson would have been a stranger to the historical Jefferson—even a repellent one. Forum commentators Betsy Erkkila and Barry Shank both pointed out the ahistorical nature of Hardt's project and of how the modern-day concept of democracy he sketches out is based only loosely on ideas Jefferson espoused during his lifetime.[37] Jefferson's ideas have to be revised extensively in order for them to do the work Hardt wants them to do. As Shank noted shrewdly, "there is much more Michael Hardt than Thomas Jefferson in the project of democracy that is outlined in this essay."[38]

But if we read Jefferson less formulaically, if we do not try to shoehorn him anachronistically into a 21st century political theory that would be alien to him, and if we accept the messiness of Jefferson's thinking and the messiness of history generally, then we do find a Jefferson that has had something to say to Americans through the centuries and right down to the present. This is particularly true in matters of race, long the dividing line in American history and culture. Historians, writing at the height of the Sally Hemings controversy in the late 1990s, gave voice to what the acceptance of the Hemings-Jefferson relationship might mean. Peter Onuf and Jan Lewis, noting the symbolic value of Jefferson for the nation, spoke of the possibility of "another American synecdoche, in which Jefferson and his plantation world stand for a multiracial America in which racial reconciliation is achieved by interracial sex." And, in the same vein, Sean Wilentz speculated: "If one of the white mandarin men who founded this country respected, even loved, a black woman slave, and created a real but underground family with her, then it is only further proof that intimacy between black and white, and the possibility of decency between black and white, existed even in conditions of brutal racial oppression, and so may exist in the bettered but still

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[37] See the spirited—and to my mind absolutely persuasive—critiques of Hardt's essay by Betsy Erkkila, "Radical Jefferson," in *American Quarterly*. 59 (June 2007), 277–289 and Barry Shank, "Jefferson, the Impossible," in *Ibid.*, 291–299.

[38] Shank, "Jefferson., the Impossible," 291.

troubled conditions in which we now live."[39] These thoughts are all the more compelling and resonant in the United States in the age of Barack Obama.

Ultimately, what we think about Jefferson remains highly individualized. It depends on which lens or combination of lenses we choose to view him through. It depends on our own reckoning of the ratio between good and bad in Jefferson, between what we deem acceptable and unacceptable. It depends, too, on what kind of sliding scale we construct in which to weigh his character, his achievements, and his legacy. And it depends, also, on how willing and able we are to ignore Jefferson's stage directions for how we should think of him—our capacity for "understanding Jefferson in ways not dictated by him," as Alan Gibson puts it, speaking of the man's overriding concern for protecting his reputation and constructing his legacy.[40] For each of us these lenses—or, given Jefferson's multidimensionality, perhaps "prisms" works better—will be highly idiosyncratic.

It is altogether fitting that Jefferson and American democracy are bound up together, one linked indivisibly with the other. When we talk about democracy we are talking about Jefferson; when we discuss Jefferson, we are ultimately discussing democracy. What we think about him is connected unavoidably to what we think about the state of American democracy, both historically and at present. And if we are ambivalent about democracy we are also understandably ambivalent about Jefferson, its most prominent early symbol and champion. Our thoughts about both Jefferson and democracy are rarely straightforward and unambiguous, and it is the tensions, the contradictions, the "rarely paired qualities" about both that make each fascinating and troubling at once. Just as Jefferson was a divisive figure in his day, then, he remains one in ours.

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[39] Onuf and Lewis, "American Synecdoche," 136; Wilentz, "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Thomas Jefferson," 40.

[40] Gibson, "Being Thomas Jefferson," 574. On the efforts of early American political leaders to protect and craft their own reputations, see Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, 2001).

That said, however, we can do more than simply throw up our hands and pronounce Jefferson impenetrable. When we think about Jefferson—no matter how disparate our thoughts may be—we are thinking and speaking in the same language: the language of democracy. Although some elusiveness will always remain, we can tease out our underlying ambivalence about democracy by paying close attention to what scholars have written about Jefferson over the years—and then by paying close attention to our thoughts about those works. We may interpret the meaning and the future of democracy differently, but the fact remains that we are actually talking about democracy when we talk about Jefferson. This helps ground even our personal, individual interpretations in a common concept and language so that whatever differences and contradictions emerge are nonetheless rooted in a common soil.[41]

This is why John Adams was correct at least in a larger, symbolic sense when he exclaimed on his deathbed in 1826 that "Thomas Jefferson still lives." Jefferson *has* lived on even though he died the same day as Adams. Jefferson will remain deeply relevant no matter how we view him. His relevance, wrapped up as it is in the essence of American democracy, is the most essential Jeffersonian quality of all. And it is why Jefferson, indeed, still lives.

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[41] I am grateful to Matt Hale for helping me clarify my thoughts on this matter.