

**Self-Evident Truths: Love, Complicity, and Critique in Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* and *The President's Daughter***

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It is well known that the man, *whom it delighteth the people to honor*, keeps, and for many years past has kept, as his concubine one of his slaves. Her name is Sally... By this wench Sally our president has had several children. There is not an individual in the neighbourhood of Charlottesville who does not believe the story; and not a few who know it...

James Thomson Callender's exposé of the Jefferson scandal (1802)

We hold these truths to be self-evident: 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.

Thomas Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence* (1776)

DNA tests performed on the descendants of Thomas Jefferson's family and of Jefferson's young slave, Sally Hemings, offer compelling new evidence that the third president of the United States fathered at least one of her children as has long been speculated, according to an article in the next issue of the scientific journal *Nature*.

Dinitia Smith and Nicholas Wade, "DNA tests indicate Jefferson did father slave child"

The centuries long debate surrounding the rumored liaison between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings returned to the center of American historical consciousness in November 1998, following the publication of DNA test results that proved a paternal genetic connection between Jefferson's and Hemings' heirs. As shown in the above epigraphs, the rhetoric that operates within the discursive terrain is often competitive, contradictory, and contentious; it offers late twentieth-century readers a convenient set of texts for the study of the influence of perspective on both the creative and analytical aspects of historical interpretation. A detailed examination of the major fictional responses to this debate, this essay explores the manner in which embedded discourses of race, sex, and equality operate within both early national and late twentieth-century historical narratives about the Jefferson-Hemings liaison.

By exposing Jefferson's supposed liaison in 1802, James Callender revealed American social and sexual anxieties.<sup>1</sup> The allegations are made especially controversial in contrast to a text that bears Jefferson's own measured prose, *The Declaration of Independence*, a text that positions its author as one of the fathers of American freedom. While traditional biographers have championed Jefferson's accomplishments as one of the Founding Fathers, non-traditional scholars from historically marginalized groups have attempted to substantiate Callender's claim.<sup>2</sup> The primary literary texts in this article, Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* (1979) and *The President's Daughter* (1994), support a counter narrative that rescues Sally Hemings from historical denial. These texts exhume historical material once thought lost to the national historical record by questioning accepted facts through the depiction of the imagined life of Sally Hemings and her children.

The new evidence reveals many Jeffersonian scholars' racial and sexual biases as it emphasizes the speculative nature of their own take on the Jefferson-Hemings liaison. In a *New York Times* editorial, Brent Staples argues that the emergence of DNA evidence in November 1998 further substantiated the counter-narrative: "It also vindicates people like Brodie and the novelist Chase-Riboud who were scorned as lust peddlers for thinking the master and the slave had an affair" (Staples A-26). Even at the end of the twentieth century,

with new evidence at hand, many Americans were unable to accept this kind of shocking contradiction that African American Law Professor Annette Gordon-Reid, author of *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1997), argues is neither shocking nor a contradiction: "If this evidence had been applied to almost anyone other than Jefferson, the matter would have been settled long ago. Make no mistake, the additional scientific information is important... A more disciplined, rigorous and less prejudiced application of historical method could have yielded the same answer" (Gordon-Reid 1998, A-27). In order to understand the counter-narrative and its particulars, we must begin with the traditional treatment of the original rumor, and the tactics which even to this day emerge to squelch marginalized rumblings.<sup>3</sup>

This paper focuses on how these historical debates function in dialogue with American literary texts that engage in these controversial issues. It is not my intention to retrace the grounds of historical debate concerning the liaison, nor is it my goal to prove that my primary texts, Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* and *The President's Daughter*, succeed in revising the historical record, especially since we know that the debate did not fundamentally change what we might call the facts.

Although the novel can be considered to be a turning point in the Jeffersonian debate, as well as African American studies, *Sally Hemings* has had to contend with harsh criticisms. Chase-Riboud's engagement with the Jefferson-Hemings controversy from Sally Hemings' perspective prompts a consideration of the ways in which the author spurs historical debate through the articulation of fictionalized narrative. Chase-Riboud imagines the lost connection between Jefferson and Hemings, and exposes complications that push American readers into uncomfortable territory. Her readers are not only forced to confront the possibility that the relationship occurred, but must witness, within the bounds of narrative, the effect of this relationship on Sally Hemings' psyche. My analysis of *Sally Hemings* and *The President's Daughter* further complicates the issue of rights and paternity through an exploration of the ways in which these novels critique the national historical record, and engage in constructive commentary on American literary history.

As an expatriate author who resides in Paris, Chase-Riboud's fiction is rarely characterized in our traditional ways of thinking about gender and nation. Critics rejected Chase-Riboud's project due to both textual and extra-textual politics. Her depictions of slave life, and of the master/concubine relationship, as well as her handling of Jefferson's character were hotly contested by both black and white reviewers. In *The Jefferson Scandals* (1981), Virginius Dabney chronicled the controversy surrounding Fawn Brodie's psychobiography of Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974), which countered traditional perspectives on the Jefferson/Hemings liaison as well as the release of Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings*. The author reveals his prejudices, on the side of traditionalism, as he attempts to clear Jefferson's name from the defamatory claims of miscegenation. His narrow-minded critiques of both texts surface exacting charges against Chase-Riboud. He operates under the assumption that her aim was to represent historical facts according to traditional views of Jefferson's life. He argues that Chase-Riboud's novel is a work of "faction," that is, the blending of fiction and fact that became quite popular in the 1960s and 70s. Dabney says of her attempt at the historical novel: "What of Barbara Chase-Riboud's 'faction' as a literary achievement?... As a first adventure novel written by an author not schooled in the history of the period, *Sally Hemings* may be said to have been a reasonably creditable performance, if one overlooks the basic fact that its entire theme is founded on completely unproven assumptions as to Thomas Jefferson's relationship with one of his slaves" (Dabney 69-70). Since Dabney cannot consider acceptable Brodie's claim in her study that lends truth to the rumor that Jefferson continued an extended affair with Sally Hemings, he is less than willing

to engage in the kind of suspension of disbelief and subsequent critical engagement that Chase-Riboud accomplished. He makes much of the lack of historical evidence for Sally's secret bedroom above Thomas Jefferson's or for the misnaming of historical places and personages. In an attempt to discredit Brodie and Chase-Riboud, Dabney only succeeds in a picaresque analysis which carries as its assumptions an unblemished myth of the founding father: "the basic criticism to be made of *Sally Hemings*, of course, is the fundamental assumption around which it revolves is spurious. The strong probability is that Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings had only the most conventional and proper relationship" (Dabney 73). Old guard Jeffersonian historians such as Dabney advanced the claim that the text was based on "spurious" assumptions because the text's fictive argument did not jibe with the traditional perspective nor with contemporary characterization of slaves in American literature.

Sally Hemings is an atypical slave woman. In the novel, she holds what might be analogous to an upper middle class position: she has been to Paris, she is fluent in French, she has the fine taste of the rich, she is familiar with the artists and power brokers of her time. This kind of characterization stands opposed to our popular understanding of a slave woman's life, in which we assume that the authentic bondswoman's experience was synonymous with lower-class status, due to racism and the paternalism of slavery. Sally Hemings was never raped, never beaten, never made to do back-breaking field labor. She is not the outspoken voice of revolution or resistance in the text. Although she knows her familial history of concubinage, Sally Hemings is never explicitly made to be the living testament of generations of rape and incest. As she was never publicly acknowledged as Jefferson's lover, there is little trace of her in the historical record, except as a subject of scandal and folklore. Keeping these differences in mind, one begins to anticipate the critical backlash against Chase-Riboud's novel, due to the fact that it does not engage in slavery's archive through expected fictional patterns.

In 1990, Barbara Christian argued in "'Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something': African American Women's Novels" that the continued marginalization of Sally Hemings within the narrative is enough to hinder its literary and political efficacy in comparison not only to William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*, but also to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Where Christian sees Brown as launching a critique of Jefferson through the depiction of the sufferings and hardships that Clotel must endure as a slave, she sees Chase-Riboud's project as hampered by its interrogation of the historical record through romance (Christian 335). Although she considers *Sally Hemings* to be driven by revisionist impulses, she argues that it is not as revisionist as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), or Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986). Christian attributes the narrative's shortcomings to the fact that Sally Hemings tells her story to Nathan Langdon, the white census taker: "Still, Chase-Riboud has her protagonist tell her story to a white man who is trying to rationalize slavery so that at times Sally Hemings' narrative seems as censored as the slave narratives of the nineteenth century" (Christian 336). She interprets the politics of this novel as outside her definition of either historical revisionism, or black feminist writing, which relies heavily on the use of imagined historical experiences in order to represent what critics might consider to be a more politically correct representation of inner lives of slaves.

Christian suggests that Sally Hemings' marginalization limits the novel's narrative possibilities: "Chase-Riboud is faced with a dilemma: Hemings, the main character, is encased in myth; yet she lingers in the margins of historical records" (Christian 337). To be fair to Chase-Riboud, it should be noted that her characterization of Sally Hemings foregrounds her problematic relationship to history. Sally Hemings is, in many ways, marginalized by her situation within the novel. The contradictions of love and concubinage, the problems of age and public status, combine with the fact of race in order to accomplish this task. Christian does not attribute significance to Chase-Riboud's characterization of an

institutionally marginalized figure in American history. In order to make her reading work, she must ignore the powerful confrontation that occurs early in the novel between Nathan Langdon and Sally Hemings, which results in her rejection of him as friend and confidant.

Sally Hemings ends her relationship with Nathan Langdon, the Albermarle County Census taker, after a summer's worth of intimate conversations. Their relationship ends because he proudly reveals that he recorded her and her sons as white. As Chase-Riboud imagines the scene, Sally Hemings is angered by how cavalierly Langdon erases her and her children from census records. She crafts Sally Hemings' explosive reaction to Langdon's decisions to demonstrate the depths of her racial awareness and historical understanding. Given the racial and sexual mores of the time, Sally Hemings knew that Langdon had erased her identity to release Jefferson's legacy from the burden of amalgamation. Chase-Riboud does not let Sally Hemings endure another injustice without a fight: "...I'm tired of white men playing God with my flesh and my spirit and my children and my life, which is running out... You've left me nothing of my own, not even my color!" (SH 53). In the aftermath of this argument, Chase-Riboud depicts Sally Hemings as able to acknowledge her suppressed anger in response to the circumstances of her life. She realizes that she "had loved the enemy" (SH 53). This rage empowers her to destroy the remaining evidence of her life as Thomas Jefferson's concubine. While Sally Hemings burns her diaries, the narrator comments on the diary's importance: "There, before her, in small neat script, was the account of hours: every visit with its date and length of stay Thomas Jefferson had made to Monticello from the time she had returned to Virginia with him. Re-enslaving herself. Thirty-eight years. Thirty-eight years of minutes, hours, months. A certainty that her fate was more than a personal one overtook her" (SH 54). Chase-Riboud has developed Sally Hemings as moving away from complicitous romantic slave girl who became intimately attached to the founding father; rather she has become bitter and rebellious. At the beginning of the book (but the end of her life), she is presented as racially and politically aware enough that the narrator can tell us that after Sally Hemings burnt all traces of her relationship with Jefferson, "she felt a deep calm. She no longer feared anything, not death itself. She had crossed that line. Even if they hanged her" (SH 54). Empowered by this final act of defiance, Sally Hemings is then able to look back on her life with a sense of detachment. At this moment in the narrative, Chase-Riboud frees her from a lifetime of oppression.

If this novel complies with an abolitionist politics of censorship that Christian argues influenced the production of slave narrative, then why did this text cause such an uproar amongst historians in general, and Jeffersonians in particular? Christian's critique of Chase-Riboud is that she operates within the bounds of the historical record, and this is the reason for the scene in which Sally Hemings destroys all records of her existence - her diaries, and his letters: "Because Chase-Riboud must rescue her heroine from myth, she cannot completely free herself from the conventional trappings of the historical novel, trappings which constrain her imaginative use of historical data" (Christian 336). One wonders what a more imaginative text might look like, especially if we consider the extremes to which Chase-Riboud rescues Sally Hemings from a non-existent and highly contested set of historical materials. If we are to align ourselves with Christian, then we must contemplate Chase-Riboud's narrative and Christian's harsh criticisms of its politics which underscore the question of what it means to reconstruct a voiceless, yet mythic life. What does it mean to coax Sally Hemings from the margins of American colonial history?

Ashraf H. A. Rushdy claims that, "A large part of what Chase-Riboud does is challenge conventions of the American historiographical tradition that lead Sally Hemings to make this particular distinction between significance of her life and Jefferson's. Sally Hemings' reflections on her role in 'History' suggest how historiography itself fails to achieve a satisfactory representativeness" (Rushdy 105). Rushdy sees Chase-Riboud as part of a long

tradition of African American historical novelists such as "Walker, and Gaines before her and Sherley Anne Williams and Toni Morrison after her [who] make the relationship between supplemental memory and written historical records an issue involving the play between orality and literacy" (Rushdy 106). Counter to Christian's critique of the methods that Chase-Riboud uses to represent Sally Hemings in the novel, Rushdy understands Chase-Riboud's project to be analogous to those fictive arguments launched by Chase-Riboud's contemporaries. Rushdy reads Chase-Riboud's intervention into the historical record in terms of a contradiction "between an official, written record and an unofficial, oral testimony" (Rushdy 107). He focuses on the interaction between Langdon and Sally Hemings that frames the novel. In his analysis, Rushdy considers Langdon's position as census taker and researcher as being analogous to that of an official historian, and Sally Hemings' position as a marginalized subject of history, who, by telling her story, undermines the authority of the official historical record. He emphasizes memory as a catalyst in Chase-Riboud's historical critique. There is no doubt that memory can be used as an important critical tool in the process of exhuming buried historical perspectives, but Rushdy's analysis gets bogged down in critical categories that seem appropriate for African American woman's novel - oral history, voice, and memory - which diminish the singular ingenuity of Chase-Riboud's departure from previous expectations of the black historical novel in general and depictions of slave women in particular.

In *Sally Hemings*, Chase-Riboud complicates the politics of love, and the passionate undercurrents in the master/slave relationship. The imagined experiences of Sally Hemings' life are constructed upon the scaffolding of Thomas Jefferson's official history - his life as a diplomat in Paris, his returns to Monticello, the recorded birth of each of Hemings' children nine months after his arrival, and the emergence of the scandal. Chase-Riboud's historical project considers the possibility of the existence of an alternative historical reality at Monticello, one in which Sally Hemings emerges as a powerfully rendered character who is central, not marginal, to the narrative. One of the ways issues of love and enslavement, passion and power are manifested in Sally Hemings is through the references, throughout the novel, to the history of concubinage that had occurred between Martha Wayles Jefferson's family and the slaves they owned that were members of Sally Hemings' family. The narrator tells us that when Sally Hemings' mother dies, she and Thomas Jefferson's daughter, Martha, must confront their shared past: "In the sweltering heat of that room she and Martha had sat in a strange southern circle of complicity: the concubine, daughter, the mistress and the slave; the aunt and the niece. All three women were reflecting, each in her separate way, on the intricacies of their blood ties and relationships. There had been love, servitude, hate, womanhood" (SH 25). As John Wayles' mistress, Sally Hemings' mother bore him many children, including Sally. To complicate matters even more, Elizabeth's mother, a full-blooded African, had been stolen by John Wayles from Captain Hemings, an Englishman and slave trader, the man she had served as concubine. These historical facts are rendered to us through the remembered voice of Elizabeth Hemings. Sally Hemings is rendered through a multiple number of voices - third person omniscient which seems to be a historical voice, third person limited omniscient which emerges as the voice of the historical figure, and first person. Only Sally Hemings' and Elizabeth's experiences are narrated through the "I" voice. Also Sally Hemings' mothers' sections are quoted as if her story is truth. Elizabeth's version of history and the experiences of slavery are important counterbalances to Sally Hemings' love story.

Chase-Riboud tells a passionate love story that is at once loaded with complicity and critique. Throughout the novel, she explores the connections and contradictions between love and slavery, ownership and passion, masters and lovers. The Hemings' women's stories of enslavement begin with the pain of slavery. Elizabeth's mother had been kidnapped from her

lover, and tried on numerous occasions to escape from John Wayles' bondage. When Wayles decides to punish her, the result is catastrophic. Elizabeth tells us about the effect this has on her mother: "My mother never ran away again. There is something about a brand in the flesh that will stay with you until death. You never forget. Beatings you can forget. But not the scar. Especially a woman" (SH 28). The scar is the physical embodiment of the pain and suffering she endured as Wayles' slave. The slippage of the brand from face to breast marks the sexualized nature of that abuse. By burning that symbol into her flesh, Wayles claims her body as his own. Here we see a surfacing of the pain of slavery, a theme that returns later in the narrative when Sally Hemings looks for the physical scarring on her body as a mark of her enslavement, but finds nothing: "Once, in the privacy of her attic room, she had pulled down her bodice and stared at the smooth skin, expecting somehow to see the branded scar "C" for concubine on her flesh just as the famous La Motte had recently been branded with a "V" for *voleuse* on her shoulder, and her grandmother with the "R" for runaway on her breast. But there had been nothing but smooth skin" (SH 119). The signs of abuse are not on Sally Hemings' body; they are in her soul. Sally Hemings' invisible scars bespeak her historical invisibility. But as Chase-Riboud imagines it, her suffering is deeply resonant. When Chase-Riboud has her stare at her body, her psychic pain is not reflected on her flesh. Her smooth skin is analogous to the smooth historical record that is predicated on the repression of Sally Hemings as a figure in Jefferson's life. This is one of the reasons why it is difficult to read this novel as a critique of slavery. The clues are there, but one must explore the ways in which the familial history of the Hemings women is depicted in order to surface the complicated politics of slavery that is being launched in the text. Elizabeth Hemings knows all about the emotional cruelty and deprivation that a slave woman must endure if she dares to love her master: "...I told all my daughters, beautiful things all of you, don't love no masta if he don't promise in writing to free your children. Don't do it. Get killed first, get beaten first. The best is not to love them in the first place. Love your own color. That brings pain enough. Love your own color if you can, and if you're chosen, get the freedom for your children..." (SH 27).

Elizabeth knows that Sally Hemings will be victimized by her love for Thomas Jefferson. There is nothing that she can do to change her mind or to stop her. It is in her blood and has been played out in her lineage. The narrator tells us that Elizabeth can only attest to how detrimental it will be: "She herself had trained her own daughter, her favorite child, to the triple bondage of slave, woman, and concubine, as one trains a blooded horse to its rider, never questioning the rights of the rider. If she hadn't done that, her daughter would never have come home from Paris... How could she have known that her vision of the perfect slave would coincide with his vision of the perfect woman. And Sally Hemings loved Thomas Jefferson. That was the tragedy. Love, not slavery. And God knew how much slavery there was in love..." (SH 33-34). The conflation of love and slavery results in what the narrator calls "the tragedy." Both Jefferson and Hemings are powerless to the forces of history and power of love. The word "love" seems out of place in this novel, for how can love exist within the bounds of enslavement? Chase-Riboud suggests that all lovers can fall into the trap of emotional enslavement, but for Jefferson and Hemings the dynamic is particularly cruel.

Early in her life, Sally Hemings is a passionate romantic. Before she and Thomas Jefferson become lovers, she is idealistic and dreamy: "Perhaps I had always known that he would claim me. Had not the same thing happened to my mother and my sisters?... Perhaps so, but I knew as sure as death that I belonged to Thomas Jefferson" (SH 103). The language that Chase-Riboud uses undercuts the fated nature of Hemings' version of her romantic narrative. According to Hemings, the affair with Jefferson was scripted into her life with as much certainty as her own demise. Although the relationship does not result in her literal death, she does experience a psychological death that further underscores the linkage between passion and enslavement. When they fall in love, their emotional bondage is reciprocal. For all of the

grand passion, Sally Hemings cannot help but read her situation through the matrilineal history of enslavement and concubinage: "I was seized with a terrible yearning. I thought of my mother and her mother before her, nothing would ever be the same again. Nothing would ever free me of him. Nothing would erase those strange words of love which I had to believe in my weakness. 'Je t'aime,' he had said. In his terror, he has used that most potent of weapons, the ruler of the mighty as well as the helpless. And I had answered, without any other words passing between us. 'Merci, monsieur'" (SH 107). The love scenes are a political challenge to contemporary readers because, on the whole, we would like to imagine only one version of the sexual dynamic between masters and slave women, and that is the forced encounter of rape.

The very idea of any type of complicity on the part of slave women is politically unnerving, because it makes slavery an even more complicated set of relations, which become no less entangled in the sequel, *The President's Daughter*. The novel counters a national historical narrative that erases all possibilities of Jefferson and Hemings' daughter, Harriet. Harriet's life had been previously represented in a veiled fashion by William Wells Brown in *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853). Although Chase-Riboud's title references its literary precursor, the novel imagines Harriet's story from her point of view. As a result of this form of narrative construction, history becomes centered around her who has been lost to it, or, to be the most generous, marginal to it.

But, in *The President's Daughter*, Chase-Riboud negotiates an archive of historical information in a way that opens up representational possibilities. The representation of the personal is used as a critique of the national. As Chase-Riboud "project[s] a life," she imagines that life as a text in contrast to the other historical milieu that she is investigating in the novel. These rescued individuals are delineated genealogically; that is, familial history becomes the crux of national critique. The recreation and centering of a figure that has been on the margins of history is implicit in the process of constructing the lives of lost historical persona. Harriet's story is framed by the intensity of her parents' doomed relationship. Daughter of president and slave, Harriet understands the conflicted nature of her "biography."

Just as her father had promised her mother in Paris, Harriet is freed on her twenty-first birthday. After this point in the narrative, Chase-Riboud imagines that Harriet is terribly aware of the cost of her freedom. She can never return to Monticello, nor can she ever acknowledge that she is the product of the rumored union between a founding father and his slave. Harriet suppresses the facts of her life, denies her place in history, but the circumstances of her life force her to come to terms with her past. There are many references to the term "biography" which highlight the ways in which Harriet's passing depends upon the abandonment of her slave biography in favor of the conscious construction of a free biography. In this free story, her whole family died in a fever epidemic that swept through her tidewater community. In her new life, her father's assistant, Adrian Petit, becomes her guardian. She is constantly thinking through the ramifications of the choices that she has had to make in the construction of her new identity. While she is in Paris, on the run from impending marriage as the assistant to an abolitionist writer, Harriet contemplates the beginnings of her mother's [Sally Hemings] and father's [Thomas Jefferson's] conflicted and complicated romance. She hears voices from the past – her mother's, father's, and Uncle James': "Their chorus compelled me. Complex, contradictory, self-serving, or brutally honest, each presented its version of those two winters in Paris in which my father had seduced my mother and my own biography had begun" (PD 171). Even before her birth, Harriet's biography is marred by complicity and denial, which manifests itself in a confusion about her own identity. Like her mother in the aftermath of life at Monticello, Harriet can never be free of Thomas Jefferson's influence. This seemingly repressed history refuses to be denied.

Just when Harriet believes that she has successfully put the past behind her, her rich white Philadelphian fiancé, Thance Wellington, offers to take her fingerprints because he is fascinated by its possibilities. He explains to Harriet that fingerprints can identify the differences even between himself and his identical twin, as if, he says, "one of us were black and the other one white... Fingerprints have the unique merit of retaining all their particularities throughout life, and so afford a more infallible criterion of identity than any other bodily feature" (PD 78). As she realizes that her fingerprints could reveal her true identity, Harriet becomes panicked: "A chill ran up my spine as I turned and looked into the laboratory mirror. Could these marks prove I was a black fugitive slave instead of a free white Virginian?" (PD 79) Much to Harriet's relief, Thance says that fingerprints cannot be read as an indicator of racial identity. Later in the narrative, Harriet loses her fingerprints in a laboratory accident, when her hands are horribly burned in a mixture of acidic chemicals. Taking off the bandages, Harriet muses, "My blank fingertips were the only lasting souvenir of the accident. My identity was erased. I felt both sad and jubilant. My heart beat faster. It was a sign, I thought, as I stared at my mutilated hands. My oblivion was complete. The injury of my birth eradicated" (PD 279). Harriet's accident recalls her mother's burnt fingertips, and the ways in which her identity was destroyed by concubinage, a poison stronger than laboratory acid. The physical erasure of Harriet's identity cannot outweigh the mental torture involved in the construction of a new identity. Although it is acquired in freedom, Harriet's scar resonates with the history of suffering that the Hemings women have endured: her great-grandmother's branded breast, her grandmother's broken spirit, and her mother's burnt fingertips. Even though she believes that her past has been erased, the scar burns it into her flesh.

In *The President's Daughter*, Chase-Riboud depicts Harriet Hemings, the protagonist, as she confronts her life in text. The intertextual nature of this allows Chase-Riboud to bring issues of history and memory to the fore. Toward the end of the novel, Harriet befriends the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, who asks her to give her opinion of *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter*, a novel that the editor is considering for publication. Harriet reads curiously, lingering over the death scene, quoted in full from Brown's text: "I sat reading my 'biography' with an eerie feeling of jubilation, turning the pages with my blank fingers. How dead was I? I shivered... Hadn't I drowned? Wasn't I dead? Hadn't I chosen oblivion rather than slavery? The fictitious life of Harriet Hemings, written by a fugitive slave, had been read by millions of Englishmen and Sarah might now serialize it as antislavery propaganda. *Clotel, or the President's Daughter*. What else could I wish for?" (PD 327). She breaks into laughter at the irony of the situation: she is reading her own fictionalized biography, a text that reaps its meaning from the drama of her death. She is oddly drawn to it.

Brown can tell a version of the story that Harriet cannot tell for the sake of her and her family's safety. Harriet's identity as a free white woman depends upon her silence about her parentage. Chase-Riboud brings Brown's novel into the narrative to provoke Harriet's reflection on the circumstances of her life. Her identity hinges upon her concealment of her personal history. In an attempt to fill the emptiness, she flaunts *Clotel* around the house: "For weeks I left *Clotel* lying around ostentatiously on tables, shelves, mantelpieces. Sometimes I left it open, sometimes closed. But no one picked it up or even glanced at it" (PD 328). Even though Harriet has conflicted feelings about *Clotel* and its accuracy of representation, she holds onto it as a version of a story she cannot tell. This situation allows us to reconsider the issue of borrowing texts, in Brown's case, a circumstance often read as a sign of creative failure or lack of invention. Just as Brown borrowed from Lydia Maria Child's "Octoroons," Chase-Riboud borrows from Brown. But, for different effect; where Brown's use of passages from Child's story seems rote and unimaginative, Chase-Riboud brings Brown's text in as a conversation piece. As Harriet Hemings comments on Brown's depiction of her life as

nothing more than a tragic rumor, she forces her audience to contemplate the meaning of her historical, as well as her literary death, thus engaging readerly constructions of the nature of history, psychology, truth, and representation.

One of the most interesting intertextual aspects of *Sally Hemings* and *The President's Daughter* is the conversation that they maintain with nineteenth-century American and English literature and culture as well as its invocation of psychohistorian Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*. Brodie's text is classified as a "psychohistory"; it interrogates the silences of the life of Thomas Jefferson in order to surface the importance of figures on the margin of the myth. Psychohistory can be characterized as a discourse that enables the dramatization of historical narrative. Facts function as materials sifted through the screen of consciousness. Psychohistory, or the surfacing of the subject's interior life, necessitates a balance between the constructions of fiction and fact. From existing materials, records, letters, cultural histories, and observations of the subject by their contemporaries, the psychohistorian reconstructs the subject's possible motivations and reactions to events. This kind of exposure involves the invocation of imagination as well as from fictional license on the part of the historian, and suspension of disbelief on behalf of the reader.

Both Brodie and Chase-Riboud recover a life: one in romance narrative, and the other in revisionist biography, that are both feminist in impulse. Brodie attempts to recover the importance that women had in Jefferson's life. But as she discovered in the backlash of controversy surrounding the text, it is one thing to suggest that Jefferson fell in love with Betsy Walker before he married Martha Wayles, or that he carried on an affair with Maria Cosway; it is quite another to suggest that he had an affair with his slave girl, Sally Hemings. Perhaps the feminist cultural work of these texts can provide a powerful connection between methods of recovery and the reconstruction of lives and events lost to history.

As Brodie explores a different aspect of biography and historiography in her essay "Jefferson Biographers and the Psychology of Canonization," she expresses a distrust of previous Jefferson scholars. Through the use of psychohistory, with a healthy scepticism about the traditions of Jeffersonian hero worship, Brodie moves beyond the constraints of writing biography. She sees the role of the biographer as not that of reifying social and cultural myths, but of surfacing truth (Brodie 1971, 155). She positions her analysis in opposition to that of "the canonizers". Her psychohistorical interpretation, influenced by the work of the famous psychohistorian Erik Erikson, attempts to fill the empty spaces in Jefferson's biography by focusing on the effects of his interpersonal relationships with women rather than on his contributions to the historical record. Brodie argues that the rumor is denied because traditional Jeffersonian scholars ignore crucial evidence: "But much of the evidence for it is discounted in advance because it would be 'badly out of character' and because of the common assumption among whites that slaves were only too eager to establish themselves as children of the master, especially if he were distinguished. Moreover, some extremely subtle evidence in Jefferson's own writings is overlooked altogether" (Brodie 1971, 161). Brodie's research not only reopens the historical debate surrounding the veracity of Callender's charges, but also offers narrative possibilities to Chase-Riboud. Read in the context of Brodie's claim, *Sally Hemings* advances a fictive argument based on Brodie's speculation about Jefferson's personal life as it foregrounds the cultural struggle in America by examining the silences in Thomas Jefferson's official biography.

Brodie critiques the historical denial surrounding Jefferson's intimate life, constructing psychological "evidence" gleaned from a close reading of his letters to Hemings, she pays particular attention to repeated phrases as, for example, the use of the word "mulatto," which Jefferson used eight times in his diary while traveling through "France, Germany and Holland in March and April of 1788" (Brodie 1974, 229). She interprets Jefferson's interest in

Hemings emerging in the description of a painting in a letter he wrote to Maria Cosway. Brodie argues that in the letter, "he betrayed, inadvertently, as a man often does to an old love, that he had been captured by a new one" (Brodie 1974, 231). In this "Sally Hemings" chapter, Brodie points to many overlooked pieces of historical evidence, such as the fact that Jefferson paid for Sally's room and board while he was traveling through Europe.

This kind of historical conjecture is provocative. The most interesting aspect of this analysis occurs when Brodie raises speculative questions that interrogate the historical record. Brodie asks us, for example, to consider the possibility that Jefferson and Hemings corresponded while he was in Holland and Germany. She raises the questions, "Did he write to her when he was away? Was there ever even a brief note, wishing her well in her study of French?" (Brodie 1974, 233) Brodie expands upon her question by telling us that Jefferson's records of his correspondence during that time are not extant: "It is the only volume missing in the whole forty-three-year epistolary record... This raises the question whether or not someone at some time went through Jefferson's papers systematically eliminating any possible reference to Sally Hemings... But no letters or notes exchanged between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson have as yet ever found their way into the public record" (Brodie 1974, 233-234). This kind of historical mystery – the questions concerning what went on behind the historical record, and the looming question of how much was really lost to history – provides an important point of departure for the novelist who is interested in discovery through reconstruction of the past. Many moments in *Sally Hemings* are obviously inspired by Brodie's historical critique. Chase-Riboud takes Brodie's suggestions one step further, by placing Hemings' seduction before Jefferson's departure from France, thus giving a reason for his weekly correspondence, which Sally Hemings awaited. But, we are told that the letters are not of the passionate, or romantic sort. The narrator explains, "If she expected billets-doux, she got none. Instead, there was a steady stream of fatherly advice, kindly, distant, a little cold, which took on the air of a monologue, since no response was possible... Without knowing why, she showed them to no one, nor did she speak of their existence" (*SH* 110).

By answering Brodie's speculations in the affirmative, Chase-Riboud gives us a complex character worth our compassion. According to Annette Gordon-Reid, suppression and refutation were some of the tactics used by historians in order to push Sally Hemings' story to the margins of historical discourse. Gordon-Reid argues that as a novel, *Sally Hemings* made a strong impact upon historical debate precisely because of its fictive mode of argumentation. Due to its fictional nature, Chase-Riboud was able to explore the Sally Hemings character on an imaginative terrain and from a distinctive perspective. Gordon-Reid works from the assumption that Jeffersonian scholars, in particular, and American historians generally have by relying on historical, racial, and sexual stereotypes sought to discredit the African American historical voice to fit the agenda in constructing mainstream history. Within this context, Gordon-Reid understands the work of Brodie and Chase-Riboud as ground breaking for both Jeffersonian studies and African American studies. Bemoaning the loss of an early African American historical voice, Gordon-Reid argues, "The voices of blacks from that era are so few, and faint, information about the circumstances of their lives, so sketchy, that any echo or glimpse should be presumed important and treated accordingly" (Gordon-Reid 1997, 227). At the end of *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*, Gordon-Reid explains that traditional Jeffersonian scholars made a conscious effort to marginalize the Hemings story. She tells us that those historians who emphasize the importance of fact as the main reason for dismissing the Hemings' story as hearsay are ignoring speculation as a crucial element of historical interpretation. In *Sally Hemings*, imaginative history has opened up exciting and challenging representational possibilities which allow writers and scholars to imagine various possibilities for constructing African American pasts.

The rather problematic issues of truth and representation in the historical novel are immediately foregrounded in discussions of the publication and reception of *Sally Hemings* and *The President's Daughter*. Whether one begins to think of historical fictions in Barbara Foley's term, as "documentary novel," or in terms of Linda Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction," both definitions highlight the problem of truth, history, narrative, and representation. In *Telling the Truth*, Foley argues that the impetus to include documents that support the "truth" of events as textual proof continued to be an active force in late twentieth-century African American writing (Foley 256). Even though the narrative of *Sally Hemings* leans on the scaffolding of the known history of Jefferson's life, as well as Brodie's conjecture, the novel's primary concern is not that of verifying her existence. Instead, *Sally Hemings* engages the reader in a historical argument that spurs debate. Chase-Riboud has moved away from a dependence on fact in order to offer an alternate reality. In this sense, one can agree with Foley's assertion: "In the hands of the Afro-American documentary novelist, then, the invocation of an extratextual reality... foregrounds the relation between evidence and generalization and calls attention to the ideological nature of any discourse – itself included – purporting to represent reality" (Foley 266). As Chase-Riboud constructed her critique of the Jeffersonian myth through narrative, she opened the issue to more complicated debates. The novel succeeds in bringing our attentions back to the historical debate, and forces us to critique its limitations from a feminist perspective.

Chase-Riboud's feminist critique does fit somewhat into Foley's definition of "fictional autobiography": "The Afro-American fictional autobiography asserts a critical totalization of historical actuality; its pseudofactual posture primarily serves to reinforce the felt presence of a subject refusing objectification within the paradigms of racist ideology" (Foley 261). On the one hand, Sally Hemings must struggle to acquire and maintain a sense of self as she is doubly objectified as slave and lover for most of her life. As a young woman in love, she cannot fathom all of the ramifications of oppression on her life. As an older adult, she realizes the depths of her sacrifice. On the other hand, the entire work of the text does stand in opposition to what Foley calls "the paradigms of racist ideology." Chase-Riboud understood the importance of race and nation in American culture. She tells us that her main reason for writing this book was that she "had wanted to illuminate our overweening and irrational obsession with race and color in this country" (*SH* 345).

*Sally Hemings* stands on the contested grounds of history, and calls into question the problems of "truth," history, and narrative; it can be read as part of a return to history that has become a prominent feature of fictive engagements with slavery's archive. As Canadian postmodernist critic Linda Hutcheon states in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*: "Unlike the documentary novel defined by Barbara Foley, what I have been calling postmodern fiction does not 'aspire to tell the truth' as much as to question *whose truth gets told*. It does not so much associate 'this truth with claims to empirical validation' as 'contest the ground of any claim to such validation'" (Hutcheon 123). Chase-Riboud realized the multiple ways in which a resurrection of the supposed Hemings/Jefferson liaison would intervene in late twentieth-century discourses surrounding race and nation, especially if it were largely narrated by the title character. As she imaged the project of the novel, she decided that she: "...would do it through the man who almost single handedly invented our national identity – and through the woman who was the emblematic incarnation of the forbidden, the out-cast; who was the rejection of that identity" (*SH* 345). This quotation reveals the implied cultural work of the novel, as well as its postmodern catalyst. The author's need to question American history and culture through narrative exposes the ways in which narrative and history operate.

This kind of narrativized history rests on the sometimes contentious, always problematized, and often blurred divide between history and fiction. Perhaps Hutcheon best

explains the relationship through her multifaceted definition of historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon's conceptualization of narrative as translation foregrounds the relationship between stories and histories. These fictive engagements with slavery's archive interrogate the nature of historical truths. The negative interpretations of *Clotel*; or, *The President's Daughter*, *Sally Hemings*, and *The President's Daughter* as perpetuations of the scandalous rumor revealed critics' political and personal investments in the historical record. Although some have argued that publication of the DNA evidence in November 1998 provides much needed evidence which not only substantiated Chase-Riboud's, Brodie's and Gordon-Reid's claims, it also makes the interpretive situation even more problematic than it was before. In relation to the archive of cultural and familial evidence, these blood tests reveal deeply seated American racial, sexual and cultural anxieties, but do nothing to rectify centuries of racist repudiation and historical amnesia.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> James Thomson Callender broke the scandal on September 1, 1802, in the *Richmond Recorder*. In the beginning of Thomas Jefferson's and Callender's acquaintance, Jefferson employed Callender in service of the Republican Party. Callender had been jailed and fined for sedition, and had been denied several menial governmental positions. He proceeded to take revenge upon the Republican Party with an exposé of Jefferson's personal affairs. Traditional Jefferson historian Noble Cunningham argues that Callender was a pamphleteer who wrote anti-Federalist tracts on occasion and was generally considered in his day to be "a scurrilous writer and disappointed office seeker" (115). See Cunningham's *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press 1987) for further details regarding Callender's role.

<sup>2</sup> This particular rumor and its ramifications are ripe for critical analysis. Since Fawn Brodie's groundbreaking *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974), there have been several historical texts published which have analyzed the field of academic discourse on the subject such as historian Connor Cruise O'Brien's *The Long Affair* (1995), and law professor Annette Gordon-Reid's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1997).

<sup>3</sup> There are truths to this rumor: Sally Hemings lived at Monticello as a slave, she was Martha Wayles Jefferson's half-sister, who accompanied Jefferson's youngest daughter to Paris while he acted as diplomat. The story was that Jefferson and Hemings began an affair in Paris, when she was fifteen and he in his late forties, and that she returned with him to Monticello expecting their first child, Thomas. According to the rumor, five children would follow: Edison, Madison, Harriet, and Thenia – each born nine months after Jefferson's return to Monticello from Washington D.C. and Philadelphia. In its own time, the rumor was spread by abolitionists, anti-Jeffersonians and Federalists alike.

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