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**JEFFERSON'S SENSITIVITIES: HOW THOMAS JEFFERSON'S
DISCUSSIONS OF RACE AND SLAVERY ARE INFLUENCED
BY AUDIENCE**

by

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**Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for graduation with**

UNIVERSITY HONORS

with a major in

**English, Literary Studies
in the Department of English**

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Abstract:

Thomas Jefferson is often presented as an enigma. He who wrote that “all men are created equal” also owned over six hundred slaves during the course of his life. Jefferson was a man of immense complexity and intelligence and, as such, his beliefs cannot be presented in simplified terms. Although his contradictory positions on race and slavery were common during his time, his hypocrisy received critique from contemporaries. Jefferson was a famously sensitive man, and in order to avoid judgement from his peers, he often either censored himself or used eloquent but empty words to satisfy his disparagers. Some historians point toward documents where he appeases his critics as proof that Jefferson did not truly believe in the morality of racism and slavery while others argue that the slaves he owned and never freed are evidence of his actual beliefs on race. I argue that Jefferson chooses to misrepresent his beliefs on race and slavery when confronted by critics rather than face judgement or political backlash from a nation divided on the subject of slavery.

This project analyzes primary sources from Jefferson (*Notes on the State of Virginia* and letter exchanges with Benjamin Banneker, Henri Grégoire, and Edward Coles) from a literary perspective to identify how Jefferson’s audience awareness led to a certain degree of self-censorship on matters of race and slavery. By analyzing those who challenged, asked for clarification, and criticized the Sage of Monticello in conjunction with his responses to them, we can observe the precipitous line he walked as he attempted to maintain his public image. The project also uses biographies and academic studies to better understand the political atmosphere surrounding Jefferson as he deftly worked to remain a respectable politician. By both using close readings of Jefferson’s letters and examining his political context, we can begin to detangle his complicated beliefs regarding race and slavery.

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Jefferson's Sensitivities: How Thomas Jefferson's Discussions of Race and Slavery are Influenced by Audience

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In many ways, Thomas Jefferson is the most confounding Founding Father of our nation. A complex figure, he often baffles students and sensibilities because he simultaneously held beliefs we would consider contradictory today, such as his work as a champion of equality for all and his position as a slaveholder. Indeed, "To today's historian, Jefferson's writings and actions are irreconcilable, yet most interpreters wish to resolve or explain his life of paradox" (Burstin 196). Although we wish to fully comprehend Jefferson, attempts to make him more understandable or approachable cannot capture the nuance such a complicated figure demands. Lin Manuel Miranda's vastly popular musical, *Hamilton*, villainizes Jefferson as an elitist and racist while public school classrooms deify him as the architect of American liberty. The true Jefferson existed, as all people do, somewhere between these two caricatures. Jefferson's writing—thousands of pages of letters, autobiography, observations on nature, essays and treatises among other types of writing—does not help clarify his true thoughts and beliefs, particularly regarding controversial issues such as slavery and race. Despite these contradictions, the urge remains to try and comprehend him. The best understanding comes not only from studying the political and personal history of Jefferson, but also from analyzing his writing from a literary perspective.

When taking a literary approach, one crucial aspect of Jefferson's writing has to do with Jefferson's consideration of audience. When writing on the topic of slavery or race, Jefferson was extremely aware of his audience and is most vulnerable and honest when writing to an audience with whom he believes shares his beliefs or whom he knows well. When writing to an audience who disagrees with him or with whom he is not familiar, Jefferson is much more

guarded and circumspect and often refuses to give a direct answer to the questions or challenges posed to him regarding slavery or race.

Part of Jefferson's reluctance to answer questions of slavery and race has to do with his own immense sensitivity. Jefferson was a highly sensitive thinker who loved his country but especially loved his home state of Virginia. A politician for most of his life, Jefferson disliked censure, and avoided it at all costs (Shuffleton xi). Jefferson, however, was consistently questioned and criticized regarding his views on slavery and the rights of black people living in the United States. Many people recognized the dissonance between the Enlightenment assertions of equality captured eternally in the Declaration of Independence, a document which "Jefferson took particular pride in his role as primary author of" and the racist beliefs he upheld by owning slaves (Cogliano 138).¹ In order to avoid reproof on the subject of slavery, Jefferson often refused to give direct answers when questioned. Instead, Jefferson often "allowed conventional sentiment to carry his prose; and, like every skilled letter writer of his age, he hinted, gestured, and even flirtatiously taunted so as to exhibit an emotional component to his self-fashioning and to present a properly balanced man of morals and disciplined feelings" (Burstein 183).

Jefferson's efforts to avoid criticism and represent himself as highly disciplined and intelligent was crucial to him because he understood that his words and example would set a historical legacy. As Annette Gordon-Reed writes, Jefferson was aware "there could be no reasonable circumstances under which he, and his role in the Revolution, could be easily forgotten... he took great pains to try to control his legacy—spending much time writing letters that made his position on various matters known; keeping records of that correspondence in the

¹ Although we would consider Jefferson's beliefs "racist" in the twenty-first century, racism as a concept did not exist in Jefferson's world. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "racist" was not used until about 1895. For simplicity's sake, I will use "racist" or "racism" to describe Jefferson's beliefs regarding black people even though the term is not necessarily historically accurate.

order with which he wished it to be read” (Gordon-Reed, “Take Care” 4). Jefferson’s awareness of his position as a historical figure influenced the ways in which he portrayed slavery and the rights and capabilities of black people.

However, it wasn’t only his awareness of the development of United States history that affected Jefferson’s writing. He often protected himself because of the nature of politics in the early United States. Joanne B. Freeman, a professor of history at Yale University says, “In the absence of established institutions and practices, political stability depended on honorable and trustworthy politicians. Public men jealously guarded their reputations, honor, and thus their entitlement to political leadership” (29). To obtain and keep their power, statesmen engaged in the gossip that served as political currency and had the potential to elevate or ruin a man’s career. Jefferson did everything he could to protect himself from the negative effects of this gossip. His skill in dodging potential gossip is evident in nearly every letter he wrote in response to being approached regarding slavery.

Benjamin Banneker, Henri Grégoire, and Edward Coles all wrote letters to Jefferson that challenged his racist beliefs. These three men represent a range of perspectives, with Banneker speaking as a free black man whose rights were being taken away as the United States developed as a nation. Henri Grégoire was a vocal French abolitionist who worked to end slavery across the developed world. Edward Coles was a Virginian slaveowner who operated in the same political and social spheres as Jefferson. In response to the challenges presented by each of these men, Jefferson wrote them letters that display varying degrees of guardedness and politeness based on his familiarity with them. On a surface level, these letters, if studied individually, give an impression of Jefferson as a rational man willing to consider varying viewpoints. This is certainly how Jefferson viewed himself, as he wrote to his friend, the poet Joel Barlow, that he

never wanted to appear “the champion of a fixed opinion” (Jefferson to Barlow, 8 October 1809). A closer, comparative look at these letters, however, reveals that while Jefferson was willing to consider the rights of black people as an intellectual exercise, he never truly found it worthwhile to take a stance against slavery.

By conducting a comparative study of a few letters on the topic of slavery written over the course of Jefferson’s life and political career, it becomes apparent that, although Jefferson never denounces his previously expressed views, he alters the way in which he portrays his beliefs based on the audience to whom he is writing and his political position. To make this argument, it is important to first analyze Jefferson’s foundational statements on race from his book *Notes on the State of Virginia*. This book, published in 1787, presents Jefferson’s earliest and most comprehensive views on race and, because it was meant to be published only for a small, sympathetic audience, it provides a useful starting point for examining how Jefferson’s writings about race were influenced by his audience. Next, Jefferson’s 1791 correspondence with Benjamin Banneker, a free black man from Maryland, presents Jefferson’s response of careful avoidance when challenged on his statements in *Notes* regarding slavery and black people. In 1809, Jefferson was challenged more aggressively about his views on race by the French abolitionist Henri Grégoire. Jefferson’s response is nonetheless nearly identical to his reply to Banneker, which illustrates the carefully choreographed way Jefferson responded to questions regarding race and slavery from an unfamiliar audience. In 1814, Jefferson was challenged yet again about his views on race by Edward Coles during his retirement. In contrast to Banneker and Grégoire, Jefferson knew Coles professionally and the two men were fellow Virginians. As a result of these connections, Jefferson’s response to Coles contains some of his most honest beliefs regarding slavery as Jefferson refuses to answer Coles’ call to join him in the fight for

emancipation. By comparing all of these letters and *Notes*, one can begin to see how Jefferson carefully uses awareness of his audience to dodge public disapproval regarding his stances on slavery and race.

I. *Notes on the State of Virginia: Jefferson Uncensored*

Although Jefferson did not see himself as a man with fixed beliefs, he very rarely strayed from the beliefs he infamously penned regarding slavery and the abilities of black people in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In this book, Jefferson believes he maintains a scientific and rational attitude while making observations regarding the physical and mental capabilities of black people by claiming that any mental deficiencies in the black people he observed were the result of black people being naturally inferior rather than social structures imposed on them. However, Jefferson is clearly biased and racist throughout his observations. Despite the thousands of pages written by Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* is his only published book. Jefferson never intended *Notes* to be widely distributed. In an advertisement published for the book on February 27, 1787, Jefferson wrote that he “had a few copies printed, which he gave among his friends: and a translation of them has been lately published in France, but with such alterations as the laws of the press in that country rendered necessary. They are now offered to the public in their original form and language” (Jefferson, *Notes* 3). If we are to assume that Jefferson planned to only distribute his book among either people with whom he shared political opinions or who “differed as friends do, respecting the purity of each other’s motives, and confining our differences of opinion to private conversations” (Jefferson, qtd in Cappon, 246), then we can suppose that *Notes* contains some of Jefferson’s most candid beliefs because it was intended for a small, trusted audience. Although later in his career, Jefferson

would deeply censor his language regarding racism and slavery in works he knew could potentially be widely publicized, this censorship does not occur as much in *Notes on the State of Virginia* as it does in his other writings, perhaps due in part to the small group of peers he planned on sharing the work with.

Jefferson identifies a specific reason for writing *Notes*, stating that the work was written “in answer to Queries proposed to the Author, by a Foreigner of Distinction” (Jefferson, *Notes* 3). This “Foreigner” was the Marquis de Barbé-Marbois, who requested information from members of the Continental Congress about the new American states. In the summer of 1780, Joseph Jones gave the request to Jefferson, who was serving as the governor of Virginia at the time. Jefferson sent his first response to the queries in December of 1781 and Barbé-Marbois most likely considered the response complete.

Although Jefferson sent his initial response in 1781, *Notes* was never actually finished because he kept a copy and made revisions to it for most of his life. He wrote that *Notes* was “nothing more than the measure of a shadow, never stationary, but lengthening as the sun advances, and to be taken anew from hour to hour. It must remain therefor for some other hand to sketch it’s [sic] appearance at another epoch” (Jefferson to Melish, 31 December 1816). Despite his assertion that *Notes* was an unfinished work, Jefferson published a private edition of two hundred copies in 1785 (Boles 171).² When he distributed the books to close friends and families, he was insistent that they not be shared freely with others because he “feared—as did all his friends—that his criticisms of slavery and the Virginia constitutions would bring harsh censure on him” (171). After one of the original recipients died, a bookseller acquired a copy and

² I consulted John Boles’ 2017 biography on Jefferson, *Jefferson: Architect of American Liberty*, frequently throughout the process of this research. Although his writing is thorough and complete, Boles often portrays Jefferson as somebody who was not truly racist but a product of his time.

made a poor French translation. The Abbé Morellet offered to retranslate the book into French, but Jefferson worried about pirated English editions (171-172). James Madison “urged [Jefferson] in May 1786 to arrange a proper English publication, warning that with the French version soon to be available, it ‘will inevitably be translated back and published in that form’” (172). This led Jefferson to publish an English version with John Stockdale, a London bookseller (172).

Jefferson attempted to remain highly rational and scientific throughout his writing in *Notes*, both when speaking about flora and fauna of the Americas and when writing about social structures such as slavery. Part of Jefferson’s insistence upon scientific rationality was at least in part a result of his frustration with claims from French naturalists (specifically the Comte de Buffon, a well-known naturalist) that the plants and animals in the Americas were smaller and of lower quality than those in Europe (Boles 170).³ Jefferson felt these claims were offensive to Americans and the American nation because it suggested that not only were the American people inferior to Europeans, but that everything about the American continent was subordinate to Europe. Jefferson was a patriot who believed American plant and animal life was at least on par with European species. To support his theories about the strength and vigor of American flora and fauna, Jefferson attempted to base all of his claims in facts that Buffon and other naturalists could not refute. According to Boles: “In the late eighteenth century, science primarily meant accurate observation, measurement, and categorization—not theory” (170). Jefferson acquired measurements of animals in Virginia and on the continent from American naturalists as well as

³ Buffon wrote in Volume 5 of his *Histoire naturelle*, published in 1766, “In America, therefore, animated Nature is weaker, less active, and more circumscribed in the variety of her productions; for we perceive, from the enumeration of the American animals, that the numbers of species is not only fewer, but that, in general, all the animals are much smaller than those of the Old Continent. No American animal can be compared with the elephant, the rhinoceros, the hippopotamus, the dromedary, the camelopard [giraffe], the buffalo, the lion, the tiger, etc.”

detailed information on boundaries and the geography of Virginia. His longest chapter has to do with minerals and natural resources in Virginia, which he carefully measured and recorded. His attempt to base all of his claims in science are evident even when he discusses slavery—he is very clear that all of his conclusions have been drawn from his own careful observations.

Due perhaps in part to his emphasis on scientific methods and his expectation that the audience of *Notes* would be small and sympathetic to his views, Jefferson's famous indirect style is not very present throughout *Notes*. He boldly makes claims that, in later writings, he is much less candid about. For example, he provides a lengthy discussion on religion that James Madison would say was "too valuable not to be made known" (Madison to Jefferson, 15 November 1785). When it was published widely, Jefferson wrote in the advertisement for the book that the "subjects are all treated imperfectly; some scarcely touched on... some of their imperfections may with truth be ascribed; the great mass to the want of information and want of talents in the writer" (Jefferson, *Notes* 3). This disclaimer allows Jefferson to imply that if there are any faults in his statements, they have not occurred because he did not perform the scientific process correctly, but because he did not have enough information available. This careful abstention is a move that Jefferson returns to not only in *Notes*, but also in later letters when he is questioned about his views on race and slavery.

Jefferson responded to twenty-three queries in *Notes*, which cover topics ranging from the topography of Virginia to its history, laws, climate, animals, and more. His writings on race and slavery can be found almost exclusively in "Query XIV: Laws," although he does briefly discuss Indigenous Americans in the "Query XI: Aborigines."⁴ Jefferson's brief but infamous

⁴ Jefferson's views on Indigenous Americans vary greatly from his opinions of black people. This is especially evident in *Notes* when he says: "crimes are very rare among them: insomuch that were it made a question, whether no law, as among the savage Americans, or too much law, as among the civilized Europeans, submits man to the greatest evil, one who has seen both conditions of existence would pronounce it to be the last: and that the sheep are

discussion on black people and slavery begins with Jefferson discussing property laws, stating that “Slaves pass by descent and dower as lands do” (*Notes* 141). The discussion of enslaved people as property is typical and fits in the context of the laws of Virginia where black people could be defined as property. Just a few paragraphs after this discussion of black people as property, however, Jefferson seems to question this principle by suggesting an act that would “emancipate all slaves born after” the act passed (144). Jefferson’s plan for emancipation also proposes that children “continue with their parents to a certain age, then be brought up, at the public expence [sic]... till the females should be eighteen and the males twenty-one years of age, when they should be colonized” (144-145).⁵ One utterly crucial aspect of Jefferson’s emancipation plan is that enslaved people who are freed must not stay in Virginia or any of the American colonies. His attention to the idea of emancipation suggests he is aware of slavery’s infringement on the rights of man. Nevertheless, he quickly backs away from the prospect of granting slaves freedom by addressing the public opinion in Virginia regarding black people and slavery. Jefferson argues that white people in Virginia would not be able to live peaceably with once enslaved people who are freed because they would always view them as inferior, Jefferson ends his examination of black people and slavery by discussing Roman emancipation of enslaved people and then, somewhat abruptly, moving into crime and punishment in Virginia.

Throughout his discourse on slavery and black people, Jefferson continually works to present his views as the result of rational, objective reflection. After proposing and then dismissing the prospect of emancipation, he frames the rest of Query XIV by posing and

happier of themselves, than under care of the wolves” (99). Jefferson also claims that when Indigenous Americans had children with black people, their status was automatically reduced.

⁵ For Jefferson’s emancipation plans, see *Notes on the State of Virginia* pgs. 144-145. For more information on his attempts at emancipation, see “Thomas Jefferson and Antislavery: The Myth Goes On” by Paul Finkelman, pgs. 199-227.

responding to a rhetorical question: “Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state...?” (Jefferson, *Notes* 145). This is an example of Jefferson positioning himself as a rational, nonbiased man of the Enlightenment because the rhetorical question suggests he has considered the problem from multiple angles. In his *Autobiography*, Jefferson would later say his plan for emancipation was never presented to the assembly because “the public mind would not yet bear this proposition, nor will it bear it even at this day” (qtd in Magnis 493). Jefferson’s response to his own question is another attempt to present himself as a logical man of science. Jefferson says, “Deep rooted prejudices entertained by whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained” (*Notes* 145). Jefferson suggests that white and black people would never be able to live among each other because the white people would always believe blacks were completely inferior while black people would remember the abuse they suffered at the hands of white people. This explanation seems to rely more upon the nature of human beings than Jefferson’s own racist ideals because it supposes that both white and black people will remember what society was like before the emancipation process.

Jefferson continues to answer his own rhetorical question by stating that white people and black people would not be able to live near each other because of “the real distinctions which nature has made” (*Notes* 145). Jefferson presents the idea that black people are inferior to white people as indisputable fact, which represents “the same old stereotype of blacks as inferiors—the stereotype...deeply engrained in the philosophy and practice of this nation” (Collier 5). Jefferson argues that there are several differences between black people and whites. To maintain the rational logic of his argument, he begins by explaining the differences between black and white people with physical characteristics that can be easily observed: “The first difference which strikes us is that of colour” (Jefferson, *Notes* 145). He then goes on to explain that the “flowing

hair...more elegant symmetry of form” only add to the superiority of white people (145).

Jefferson perhaps recognized that this argument was superficial and chose to support it by stating, “The circumstance of superior beauty, is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?” (145-146). Here Jefferson not only states that white people are more attractive than black people, he also spends a considerable amount of time using judgmental language, such as when he describes “the eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions” (145). This description suggests that Jefferson, as a white man, is not able to understand the emotions felt by a black person. Indeed, Jefferson seems to imply that the emotions of black people are different from those that might be felt by a white person. Although Jefferson’s attempt is always to remain perfectly rational, he is transparently biased when he discusses matters of race and slavery.

After explaining what he considers to be obvious physical differences, Jefferson lists physical traits that are more difficult to observe, such as, “they have less hair on the face and body. They secrete less by the kidneys [sic], and more by the glands of the skin... [they are] more tolerant of heat, and less so of cold... They seem to require less sleep... They are at least as brave, and more adventuresome” (*Notes* 146). By emphasizing the physicality of black people, Jefferson dehumanizes the slaves he has examined. Jefferson’s seemingly careful observations categorize black people in animalistic terms. He seems to have studied them the way one might study a species of animal before sale. This is especially obvious because of the physical traits Jefferson points to. Rather than commenting on the intelligence of black people, he chooses instead to focus on their ability to perform hard labor. The objectification and dehumanization of black people not only shows the degenerated station Jefferson gives them; it is an extension of

his attempted logical, scientific argument. Jefferson continues to focus on physical characteristics and claims: “In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection. To this must be ascribed their disposition to sleep when abstracted from their diversions, and unemployed in labor” (146). Here, Jefferson moves from making arguments about the inferior physicality of black people to arguments regarding their mental capacity, which is more difficult to observe. Specifically, this line suggests that, although black people are capable of registering sensations, they are not capable of synthesizing the information by using higher levels of thought. By couching his argument about the intellectual capabilities of enslaved people and black people in a discussion of their physical, observable abilities and traits, Jefferson attempts to add to his own scientific credibility while, at the same time, asserting racist views because he fails to treat black people as humans and instead looks at them as animals that are completely inferior to him.

He continues to promote the racial inferiority of black people by directly comparing them to white people and asserting that white people’s mental capabilities are infinitely superior. Jefferson says: “Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites, in reason much inferior...and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous” (*Notes* 146). It is notable that Jefferson comments on the fact that black people have the same memory capacity as white people. However, because he states they do not have the ability to reason, which was an important principle of Enlightenment thinking, Jefferson presents in a few words the extent to which he believes black people to be mentally degenerate. Jefferson’s so-called scientific and fact-based language is once again encroached on by judgement as he describes his opinions on black

people. However, because he does it in the context of rationality and observations, he attempts to justify his racial bias.

In an attempt to suggest that he is a fair judge of the condition of black people, Jefferson takes into account the conditions of both enslaved and free black people. He writes, “It would be unfair to follow them to Africa for this investigation... It will be right to make great allowances for the difference of condition, of education, of conversation, of the sphere in which they move” (Jefferson, *Notes* 147). Jefferson uses this point to suggest that slaves in the United States are better off than black people in Africa because the slaves have been exposed to civilized culture. Jefferson also takes this opportunity to compare black people to Native Americans when he states, “The Indians, with no advantages of this kind, will often carve figures on their pipes not destitute of design and merit... They astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated. But never yet could I find a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration...” (147). In this section, Jefferson shows that his racism mostly concerns black people instead of all people of color. While he does consider the Native Americans to be “savage” (99), he also respects their mental abilities and notes that they, unlike black people, possess the capability to reason and imagine, which is much more than he credits black people. His claim here also implies that physical and mental abilities do not result from the environment one comes from but instead are based on racial factors.

Once Jefferson has moved from physical observations to mental or emotional ones by claiming that black people have been granted access to civilized society and yet not advanced mentally or emotionally, he chooses to rebut possible arguments some may have regarding the intelligence of black individuals. Jefferson says, “Misery is often the parent of the most affecting

touches in poetry.—Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [sic]; but it could not produce a poet” (*Notes* 147). Here, Jefferson addresses the work of Phyllis Wheatley, a well-known, educated slave and poet whose work was popular both in Europe and the United States. Jefferson, however, refuses to give Wheatley credit for her poetry and instead insists she is only copying religious sentiment in her work. Jefferson’s judgement of Wheatley does not just discredit her, it is also consistent with his previous claims that black people are capable of memory but not reason. Jefferson’s critique of Wheatley suggests he felt he had to put a stop to any discussion of talented black people by vehemently expressing his views on not only black people, but poetry as well. He concludes his discussion of Wheatley by decisively stating: “the compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism” (147).

Jefferson discusses another famous black artist, Ignatius Sancho, in much the same way. Sancho was an English writer and composer who was known for his letter-writing and was seen as a highly educated abolitionist (Carretta). In *Notes*, Jefferson begins by complimenting the British writer and says that his letters “breathe the purest effusions of friendship and general philanthropy, and shew how great a degree of the latter may be compounded with strong religious zeal” (*Notes* 148). Jefferson quickly clarifies his stance, however, by introducing sharp criticism:

But his [Sancho’s] imagination is wild and extravagant, escapes incessantly from every restraint of reason and taste, and in the course of its vagaries, leaves a tract of thought as incoherent and eccentric, as is the course of a meteor through the sky...Upon the whole, though we admit him to the first place among those of his own colour...yet when we

compare him with the writers of the race among whom he lived... we are compelled to enroll him at the bottom of the column. (148)

Once again, Jefferson carefully asserts that the mental capacity of black people is inferior to that of white people. Although he does vary from his previous claim that black people imaginations are “dull, tasteless, and anomalous” (146), he does so by stating that Sancho’s imagination is wild and extravagant rather than moderated or reasonable. He still maintains the idea that Sancho’s inferiority is due to his race even though it has been improved by his circumstances. Jefferson’s attempt to remain scientific and only report on observations continues to unravel as he critiques the work of Phyllis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho. Although he maintains the argument that, if they were not naturally inferior, they would be able to produce work more like a white person’s, his emotion again is utterly obvious to even the casual reader. Jefferson claims that the two pieces of evidence he has cited “proves that their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life” (148). Jefferson also cites Greek and Roman slaves as sometimes being “their rarest artists” who “excelled too in science, insomuch as to be usually employed as tutors to their master’s children” to prove that black slaves are inferior because of their race and not their enslavement (149).

Before Jefferson closes his argument, he once again reminds his audience that his claim of black people being naturally inferior both in physical and mental capabilities is reasonable and logical. To reinforce this point, he says, “The opinion, that they [black people] are inferior in the faculties of reason and imagination, must be hazarded with great diffidence. To justify a general conclusion, requires many observations...” (Jefferson, *Notes* 150). Although Jefferson claims here that one must carefully make claims such as the one he has just made, his language throughout is self-assured and emotional. However, he frames this emotional material with

several assurances of rationality within a mostly scientific and fact-based book. Jefferson cites evolution and “advance[s] as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to whites in the endowments both of body and mind” (151). His racist beliefs, which he has written extensively about, are concluded to be “suspicion only” even though Jefferson deeply espouses them in this chapter of *Notes on the State of Virginia* and in other writing throughout his life.

Notes contains some of Jefferson’s most explicit racist language and it serves as a baseline for any study of Jefferson’s primary texts. Because he did not censor himself and did not intend this document to be widely printed and read, we may assume that his writing is less staged and, perhaps, more truthful than some of the other documents he would write under political and social pressure with the knowledge that they could and would be printed. Despite the fact that Jefferson did not intend *Notes* to be published, it was widely circulated and many of the questions eventually posed to him regarding race have to do with Jefferson’s published beliefs in *Notes*. Banneker, Grégoire, and Coles all refer back to Query XIV in some capacity as they write Jefferson. As the United States became a more formalized nation, Jefferson’s views were brought into question as the United States government placed increasing restrictions on black people. Not only is an analysis of Jefferson’s response to those who challenged him important, but an understanding of the letters Jefferson believed deserved a response—regardless of how guarded his response was—is important because each of these challengers depended on Jefferson’s widely known, published beliefs. Banneker specifically challenges Jefferson on his claims regarding the mental capacity of black people while also confronting him about the contradictions between the statements of equality expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the inequalities he asserts in *Notes*.

II. Benjamin Banneker: Jefferson's Refusal to Engage

In 1787, the United States was becoming more formalized as a nation and Jefferson's political career was on the rise as he served as the first Secretary of State under George Washington. At the same time, the rights of black people were being restricted in individual states and at a national level while the institution of slavery was protected. One protection of slavery can especially be seen in the Three-Fifths Compromise included in the United States Constitution. It was in this context that Jefferson is famously and publicly challenged about his views on race by a free black man, Benjamin Banneker. Banneker was a skilled mathematician who helped survey the land for Washington D.C. and published his own almanac, a feat that required in-depth knowledge of both astronomy and mathematics (Boles 228). In a handwritten letter to the Secretary of State, Banneker plead with Jefferson to "lend [his] aid and assistance to [the relief of black people], from those many distresses, and numerous calamities" they suffered (4). He also included a handwritten copy of his almanac because his "[position] as a free, literate black man of science gave him a unique opportunity to refute prevailing arguments about the mental inferiority of people of African descent" (Ray 389). Not only does Banneker ask for Jefferson's help, he also offers a thinly veiled critique of the double standards held by the Secretary of State regarding black people and slavery by invoking Christian and Enlightenment ideals that Jefferson believed in.

Despite Banneker's assessment of Jefferson's inconsistent views, Jefferson's reply was dignified, polite, and diplomatic as he agreed with Banneker's views and states his "wish" that something could be done to help the plight of those of African descent in the United States. Some historians believe Jefferson's response was written honestly and with only the best intentions, but in his letter to Banneker, Jefferson contradicts some of the beliefs he adamantly

professed about race in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, such as those regarding the mental capacity of black people.⁶ These contradictions suggest Jefferson's views on race either underwent a radical transformation or that he was trying to avoid political and personal condemnation for the racist views he expressed in *Notes*. Surely, the political environment had, by this time, taught Jefferson to be very cautious with his writing, which most likely prompted his careful response to Banneker's commentary on his views.

Banneker's appeal to Jefferson is the plea of an educated man who is knowledgeable about his audience and able to recognize the suffering of his people. In Banneker's home state of Maryland during the 1780s and 1790s, "racial legislation deprived free blacks of many of the rights they possessed" (Bogen 382). As a free, black, land-owning man, Banneker enjoyed rights similar to those of a property-owning white man (383). He tells Jefferson he has "abundantly tasted of the fruition of those blessings...with which you are favoured" (Banneker 6). Martha Tyson suggested that "Banneker, as a free property owner of sufficient age, voted in Maryland" and "interprets this remark as a reference to Banneker's voting privileges" (Ray 390). Ray interprets this as "an important point of similarity between the free white secretary of state and the free black farmer and astronomer" (390). However, Banneker was most likely writing to Jefferson at least in part because of the dwindling rights of free blacks in Maryland. In 1783, the Maryland legislature passed a statute entitled "'An Act to prohibit the bringing slaves into this state,' which provided that slaves would not acquire the rights of freemen if they were subsequently freed" (Bogen 390). This law most likely did not directly affect Banneker's personal freedom because it did not "affect the rights of any person who was free when it was

⁶ See Boles, pgs. 460-469 for a defense of Jefferson's writing. Arthur Scherr's "'An Honest, Intelligent Man': Thomas Jefferson, the Free Black Patrick Henry, and the Founder's Racial View in His Last Years" also provides a defense of Jefferson's racism.

enacted, strongly suggesting that the legislature believed blacks who were then free had vested interests that must be respected” (390). Although Banneker was still able to vote, he clearly feels some responsibility to his race and was thus propelled to “take with [Jefferson]... a liberty which seemed to me scarcely allowable” (Banneker 3).

Throughout his letter to Jefferson, Banneker is extremely aware of the societal hierarchy surrounding him and the Secretary of State, who he hopes will be sympathetic to the plight of black Americans. Banneker begins the letter by stating: “I hope I may safely admit, in consequence of that report which hath reached me, that you are a man far less inflexible in sentiments of this nature, than many others; that you are measurably friendly, and well disposed towards us” (Banneker 4). Banneker was most likely aware of Jefferson’s previous thought experiments regarding the emancipation of enslaved people in Virginia. Within *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson outlined a plan for the emancipation of slaves. In Query XIV: “Laws,” Jefferson discusses “the most remarkable alterations” proposed to Virginian laws (Jefferson 144). One of these “alterations” was “To emancipate all slaves born after passing the act” (144). Perhaps Banneker believed that because Jefferson had previously vocalized support for emancipation, he may be interested in assisting Banneker’s cause. Banneker requested “aid and assistance to our relief, from those many distresses, and numerous calamities, to which we are reduced” (Banneker 4). A large part of Banneker’s appeal included flattery and logical arguments that appealed to Jefferson’s beliefs while still working within the complex social structure he was involved in as a black man writing to a powerful white man.

Throughout the letter, Banneker does not explicitly accuse Jefferson of holding racist beliefs. However, Banneker proves himself to be well aware of Jefferson’s familiarity with issues facing black people: “I suppose it is a truth too well attested to you, to need a proof here,

that we are a race of beings, who have long labored under the abuse and censure of the world”

(3). Banneker could be referring here to Jefferson’s writing on black people in *Notes* or he could also be hinting at the fact that Jefferson was a slave holder.

Instead of attacking Jefferson for his harsh language in *Notes* or for owning slaves, Banneker critiques Jefferson’s double standards regarding his claim to be enlightened and his close-mindedness as far as the rights black people have as beings created by “one universal Father” who has “made us all of one flesh” (4). After Banneker uses religion to support his argument, he goes on to say: “Sir, I have long been convinced, that if your love for yourselves, and for those inestimable laws, which preserved to you the rights of human nature, was founded on sincerity, you could not but be solicitous, that every individual, of whatever rank or distinction, might with you equally enjoy the blessings thereof” (5). Banneker presents Jefferson with an extremely sound, logical argument by suggesting that if Jefferson and other Americans actually believe in the values they claim to hold dear, then there can be no reason to continue slavery or to take away the rights of free black people. In doing so, Banneker calls upon the ideals that Jefferson has, perhaps inadvertently, become the champion of by co-authoring the Declaration of Independence. In doing so, Banneker asserts that if Jefferson truly is logical or believes what he professes to believe, then Banneker’s arguments cannot be refuted.

Banneker takes his argument a step further by directly quoting the Declaration of Independence: “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...” (7). Banneker uses the Declaration to present his argument that Jefferson cannot hold both the racist beliefs he wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* and the idealistic convictions penned in the Declaration of Independence. Banneker directly issues a challenge: “Here was a time, in which your tender

feelings for yourselves had engaged you thus to declare... but Sir, how pitiable it is to reflect... that you should at the same time counteract his [God's] mercies, in detaining... so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression" (7-8). Banneker attempts to point out the irony Jefferson engages in by maintaining racist beliefs and upholding slavery when he was the man who wrote that "all men are created equal." After he challenges Jefferson, Banneker issues his plea: that "your hearts be enlarged with kindness and benevolence towards them [my brethren]" (8). The implied request is that Jefferson use his influence as a man with political clout and his service as Secretary of State to work to put an end to slavery.

Banneker ends his letter by telling Jefferson he has included "a copy of [the almanac] I have taken the liberty to direct to you... I chose to send it to you in manuscript previous thereto, that thereby you might not only have an earlier inspection, but that you might also view it in my own hand writing" (10). By including a handwritten copy of his almanac, Banneker is proving to Jefferson how capable a black person can be. The hand writing, which could be compared to the letter Banneker sent Jefferson, would have served as proof that Banneker wrote the almanac by himself and did not rely on anything other than his own "arduous study, in this my advanced stage of life; for having long had unbounded desires to become acquainted with the secrets of nature" (9). Banneker also cites "the many difficulties and disadvantages, which I have had to encounter" while he was calculating and writing the almanac (9). Banneker's appeal to Jefferson's rationality created a nearly impenetrable argument that Jefferson surely could not logically refute.

Jefferson's response came only eleven days after the date of Banneker's letter (Banneker 11). The letter is very short and, within it, Jefferson does not attempt to refute any of the points made by Banneker. Instead, Jefferson agrees with everything Banneker says and does not ever

directly contradict him. The conciliatory tone is similar to other letters Jefferson—the polite and sensitive statesman—wrote, but it is questionable that he never challenges what Banneker has written. Jefferson says, “No body wishes more than I do, to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren talents equal to those of the other colors of men” (Banneker 11). While this response was very diplomatic and seems to repudiate some of what Jefferson has written about race before, it is not saying anything of substance. Jefferson says he *wishes* that he could be proven wrong, which does not contradict what he has written in *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

In *Notes*, Jefferson states his “opinion, that they [black people] are inferior in the faculties of reason and imagination, must be hazarded with great diffidence. To justify a general conclusion, requires many observations” (150). Throughout his discussion of black people in *Notes*, Jefferson repeatedly states that he has drawn his conclusions through rational, scientific observations. His allowance that he could be wrong is in line with the Enlightened, observation-heavy tone of the arguments he presents in *Notes*. Jefferson goes on to answer Banneker’s plea for the emancipation of slavery by saying, “I can add with truth that no body wishes more ardently to see a good system commenced, for raising the condition, both of their body and mind, to what it ought to be, as far as imbecility of their present existence, and other circumstances, which cannot be neglected, will admit” (Banneker 11). Jefferson does not volunteer to stand for the emancipation of slavery. Nor does he tell Banneker he is right to ask for a new system. Instead, Jefferson tells Banneker that he wishes some new system could be put into place. Jefferson does not even go so far as to suggest he has ideas to assist with the emancipation of slavery even though he presents detailed plans in *Notes*.

Jefferson ends the letter by again avoiding the controversial topics broached by Banneker. Instead, Jefferson tells Banneker, “I have taken the liberty of sending your Almanac to Monsieur de Condozett... because I considered it as a document, to which your whole color had a right for their justification, against the doubts which have been entertained of them” (Banneker 11-12). While Jefferson is complimentary, he also avoids all real issues and chooses to only write about safe topics that will not allow Banneker or others to censure him. Jefferson’s answers are utterly safe, and that is why they cannot be entirely believed.

When contrasted with his writings in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson’s response to Banneker seems even more conciliatory and unbelievable. Boles claims that “Banneker, other blacks, and white supporters of emancipation saw it [as more than a polite and meaningless gesture]. Jefferson was widely considered an enemy of slavery and his letter was seen as an important, positive defense of the black race” (229). While this may be true, an awareness of how Jefferson responded to potential criticism as well as his political savvy makes his words to Banneker appear even more hollow. This is especially true because *Notes* was a document that Jefferson consistently edited and made changes to until 1815, when he “had given up the thought of publishing a new edition in his lifetime” (Shuffleton xix); it is perplexing that he never redacted his statements about black people if he no longer believed them.

Jefferson’s later writings regarding Banneker and his almanac complicate what could be viewed as a moment in which Jefferson truly considers Banneker’s evidence of intellectual capability. Eighteen years after responding to Banneker, Jefferson wrote in a letter to Joel Barlow, a poet and public official, that “I have a long letter from Banneker which shews him to have had a mind of very common stature indeed” (qtd in Boles 230). In saying this, Jefferson seems to have redacted his previous statements about Banneker producing “a document, to

which your whole color had a right for their justification, against the doubts which have been entertained of them” (Banneker 12). Jefferson also wrote to Barlow suggesting that he “may have been misled about the legitimacy of Banneker’s sole authorship and used by Banneker’s friends through their unauthorized publication of his reply” (qtd in Boles 230). While it is impossible for us to know exactly how Jefferson felt when he responded to Banneker, his later writing suggests that he may very well have been simply putting on a conciliatory political front to protect himself from attack by Banneker’s supporters and friends as well as Jefferson’s political enemies.

By 1791, Jefferson was Secretary of State for the new republic, which was facing impending war and struggling to define itself within its own borders. The United States faced struggles on every front—impending war and invasion from Britain and riots from angry Americans. In the face of so much uncertainty, it was crucial that the politicians of the day retain respect of the populace, especially the male, white, land-owning, upper-class population. Thanks to his work on the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson was already well known and respected throughout the nation (Schapsmeir and Schapsmeir 139). The Declaration was “a manifesto with universal appeal” that popularized Jefferson and allowed him to gain national fame and powerful political friends (139). Jefferson served the historical role of being the first Secretary of State under George Washington. He was all too aware that “[i]n a government lacking formal precedents and institutional traditions, reputation was the glue that held the polity together. The fragile new republic was a government of character striving to become a government of rules within its new constitutional framework” (Freeman 32).

Jefferson was, in part, aware of these circumstances because of his adversarial relationship with Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury. Jefferson wrote that he and

Hamilton were “daily pitted in the cabinet like two cocks” (qtd in Schapsmeir and Schapsmeir 139). These two men fundamentally disagreed on what the role of government should be. Dumas Malone wrote that Jefferson and Hamilton were “symbols of a conflict of ideas which runs through the whole of American national history. No other American statesman has personified national power and the rule of the favored few so well as Hamilton, and no other has glorified self-government and the freedom of the individual to such a degree as Jefferson” (qtd in Kapstein). These two men both had a desire to shape the United States while it was young, and both understood the weight their behavior and beliefs would carry as the new nation matured.

One way to share their beliefs was through the press, a powerful tool used by men in politics to spread their ideologies and opinions throughout the United States. Many published critiques of other statesman anonymously. Jefferson, however, did not believe in publishing anonymously. He told John Adams, “I never did in my life, either by myself or by any other, have a sentence of mine inserted in a newspaper without putting my name to it; and I believe I never shall” (Cappon 246). Despite this claim, Jeffersonians and Hamiltonians frequently used the press and those in their gossip circles to unleash harmful rumors about one another. Freeman says “Jefferson fumed against Hamilton’s slanders, and Hamilton raged against Jefferson’s whispers. Washington could only plead for an end to the ‘wounding suspicions, and irritating charges’” (29). The result was a cabinet that was consistently arguing and attempting to damage fellow politicians while also doing their best to give the president advice and shape the country in a way they thought would be sustainable and useful.

One of the most ferocious fights Jefferson and Hamilton had was over Hamilton’s plan to establish a National Bank and fund the public debt during 1790 and 1791. Jefferson opposed Hamilton’s system because he “saw Hamilton’s funding system as being based on mortgaging

the revenues of future generations and avoiding debt reduction” (Swanson 499). Jefferson had a strong opinion on deficit spending: “that one generation had no right to impose its debts on the next” (499). Jefferson made no secret of his dislike for Hamilton’s plan. He vehemently “opposed Hamilton’s national bank on constitutional grounds” (499). In a letter to Washington, Jefferson said “I consider the foundation of the Constitution as laid on this ground that ‘all powers not delegated to the U.S. by the Constitution, not prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states or to the people... The incorporation of a bank, and other powers assumed by this bill have not, in my opinion, been delegated to the U.S. by the Constitution” (qtd in Boles 223). The vocal disagreements between Hamilton and Jefferson only encouraged supporters of both factions to publish their assessment of the situation in newspapers to undermine the competition. Both Jefferson and Hamilton “understood that their behavior with one another, the manner and style of their politics, would establish the distinctive character of this new nation” and so they were “obsessed with reputation” (Freeman 29). The two men understood that the National Bank would affect generations to come and both wanted to be the main source of influence over crucial financial policy.

The rampant gossip, his constant political fights with Hamilton, and partisan disagreements were perhaps not the only reasons Jefferson was very cautious about his writing. He was also aware that, due to his political fame, his writing could and had already been published without his permission. In February 1791, James Madison gave Jefferson a pamphlet to read, Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*. The essay was to be published by a printer named Jonathan Baynard Smith. When Jefferson sent the pamphlet back to the printer, he included a private note to explain why he was the one sending Smith the pamphlet. Baynard published the

pamphlet along with Jefferson's note even though Jefferson had intended the note to be private.

In July of 1791, Jefferson wrote to Adams to explain the event, saying:

I have a dozen times taken up my pen to write to you and have as often laid it down again... I accordingly wrote [Mr. Jonathan B. Smith] a note of compliment... to take off a little of the dryness of the note, I added that I was glad it was to be reprinted here and that something was to be publicly said against the political heresies which had sprung up among us. I thought so little of this note that I did not even keep a copy of it: nor ever heard a tittle more of it till, the week following, I was thunderstruck with seeing it come out at the head of the pamphlet... Thus were our names thrown on the public stage as public antagonists. That you and I differ in our ideas of the best form of government is well known to us both: but we have differed as friends do, respecting the purity of each other's motives, and confining our difference of opinion to private conversations. (as qtd in Cappon 245-246)

Jefferson had no desire for any contention to exist between him and Adams. Although they disagreed vehemently about what the best kind of government for the new republic should look like, they also respected each other's views. Jefferson's political rivals, "seeing a way to cast Jefferson as malcontent in the eyes of Washington, vilified him for his comments" (Boles 225). Surely this incident was still on Jefferson's mind when he received the polite but potentially disastrous letter from Benjamin Banneker just weeks after he and Adams resolved their issues.

Certainly, by the time Jefferson received Banneker's letter, he was well aware that others would and could publish his private notes and letters out of context and then attack him using his own words. His political experience up to this point, especially the publishing issue with John Baynard Smith and his multiple encounters with the Hamiltonians, must have instilled

Jefferson with prudence in all of his written communications as a precaution against humiliation. Readers today must be aware of these precautionary measures and the effects they surely had on Jefferson's communications, especially on controversial topics such as slavery. This could help to explain not only the politeness of Jefferson's letter to Banneker, but also the letter's extreme shortness—the entire document is only four sentences long, and all of the sentiments expressed in it are pacific in the extreme. Jefferson was probably not aware that Banneker would publish his letter and Jefferson's response, but he must have been aware that Banneker's profile as one of the men who helped plan the nation's new capital would only add an element of visibility to the entire affair.⁷ Visibility on matters of race was something Jefferson avoided at all costs. This avoidance can especially be observed during Jefferson's time as President of the United States, a time when Jefferson's views on race received ample criticism. Following his presidency, Jefferson received additional letters which, like Banneker's, pushed him to address the contradictions between his Enlightenment principles and his racist views and policies, although these letters would become much bolder and more aggressive in their approach, beginning with a 1809 letter to Jefferson from a noted French abolitionist, Henri Grégoire.

III. Henri Grégoire: Jefferson's Challenger

Henri Grégoire wrote Jefferson as Jefferson's presidency came to an end. While this section will focus on the exchange between Jefferson and Grégoire, understanding this letter

⁷ Banneker's letter was published in conjunction with Jefferson's reply as an independent pamphlet in 1792. It was also published in periodicals such as the *Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine*, the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* until the mid-nineteenth century. For more information on Benjamin Banneker, see Angela Ray's 1998 article, "'In My Own Hand Writing': Benjamin Banneker Addresses the Slaveholder of Monticello" published in the journal, *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*.

requires background knowledge on the racial controversies Jefferson encountered during his presidency. During the years that passed between the time Jefferson served as Secretary of State (1790-1793) and the end of his time as President in 1809, the United States went through tumultuous social and political changes, including contentious debates surrounding the institution of slavery. These disagreements centered around fear of slave rebellions, growing abolitionist movements in the U.S. as well as in European states, and debates over banning the importation of slaves. One of the few issues where Jefferson commented directly on the issue of slavery concerns his position on the Haitian Revolution, the first successful slave rebellion that occurred in the first year of Jefferson's first term as president. Thousands of black and white people were killed in the rebellion, but eventually the black slaves were able to win their freedom. In July of 1801, Jefferson wrote a letter reassuring "the French that he [opposed] independence in Saint-Domingue [Haiti] and [pledged] to support Napoleon's agenda" (Shen). This differs from Jefferson's typical attitude regarding slavery because he was actively taking a stance against freeing slaves instead of remaining silent. His position suggests that Jefferson disagreed with freeing slaves despite the fact that he so often remained silent on matters of slavery. David Brion Davis said that after Jefferson's return to the United States from France in 1789, "the most remarkable things about Jefferson's stand on slavery is his immense silence" (qtd in Finkelman 194). Jefferson sought discretion on matters of slavery because the matter was so contested throughout the nation and the world. Despite his avoidance of matters related to slavery, his personal relationship with Sally Hemings made slavery the centerpiece of his presidency in many ways.

Sally Hemings was a slave whom Jefferson inherited from his father-in-law. She was also the half-sister of Jefferson's wife, Martha Wayles, as both women had the same father ("Sally

Hemings”). According to some sources, Hemings “bore a striking resemblance to her half sister, Jefferson’s deceased wife” (Boles 469). Sally was chosen at the age of fourteen to be a domestic servant and maid to Jefferson’s daughter, Maria, in Paris, when Jefferson was sent to be a U.S. diplomat in Paris. During her time in Paris, Hemings became involved in a sexual relationship with Jefferson (Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*, 308). In Paris, Hemings was technically free and some historians claim that she successfully negotiated with Jefferson to receive privileges for herself and her unborn children (“Sally Hemings”). The specific nature of their relationship is unknown. While some scholars claim that Jefferson and Hemings had a loving relationship, the uneven power dynamic of a powerful white male owner and a young, enslaved black female must be acknowledged when studying the Jefferson-Hemings relationship (Nicolaisen 104-105). When Jefferson returned to the United States in 1789, Sally was pregnant with Jefferson’s child, but according to their son, Madison Hemings, “It lived but a short time” (qtd in “Sally Hemings”). Hemings later gave birth to seven children, all within nine months of Jefferson’s visits to Monticello during his time as an elected official. Through DNA testing, these children have been confirmed to be Jefferson’s (Nicolaisen 99). Although we do not know much about the Jefferson-Hemings relationship, we do know that Hemings somehow negotiated the freedom of her children. Gordon-Reed writes about Hemings: “Though enslaved, Sally Hemings helped shape her life and the lives of her children, who got an almost 50-year head start on emancipation, escaping the system that had engulfed their ancestors and millions of others. Whatever we may feel about it today, this was important to her” (qtd in “Sally Hemings”). For the most part, Hemings stayed at Monticello while Jefferson served as Secretary of State and President (Boles 467).

Jefferson was extremely private and discrete about his relationship with Hemings, but in 1802, James Callender, a political journalist, revealed the affair by attacking Jefferson in the newspapers, “out of anger that Jefferson had not granted him a government sinecure in Richmond” (Boles 470).⁸ Callender “showed ominous signs of causing trouble. Jefferson appeared undisturbed, however. ‘He knows nothing of me,’ he [Jefferson] assured Governor Monroe, ‘which I am not willing to declare to the world myself’” (Jellison 302). Jefferson never outwardly acknowledged the scandal, but Callender denounced Jefferson as “an evil, corrupt betrayer of all who had trusted and befriended him; a defaulter on debts; the defiler of public office who had profaned his oath” (303). Callender’s writing angered Jefferson, who wrote, “Every decent man among them [the Federalists] revolts at his filth” after Callender wrote the story of Sally Hemings and published it in a Federalist paper (305). The articles Callender published about Jefferson had a detrimental effect on Jefferson’s presidency. The accusations levelled against him by Callender made Jefferson even more of a target for Federalist attacks.

Not only did Jefferson face immense public backlash because of his relationship with Hemings, he also was faced with political pressure regarding the rights of black people in other nations. Many European countries allowed far more advanced rights for black people than existed in the United States. When Jefferson traveled in Paris with Hemings, she was considered a free servant rather than a slave. Slavery was illegal in France while Jefferson was there as ambassador (Boles 151). Visitors who brought slaves with them were only allowed to have them

⁸ Callender initially worked as an anti-Federalist journalist and was the first person to break the Maria Reynolds scandal involving Alexander Hamilton. He became close with Jefferson and several other prominent Republicans and was sent to prison for libel against Federalists. Callender’s trial was unfair as the case was determined by a Federalist judge. By the time Callender got out of jail, Jefferson was president. Callender demanded that the \$200 fine he had to pay be refunded. He also felt that he deserved a postmaster position in Richmond, Virginia. Jefferson paid part of the fine from his own pocket but was not able to refund it in whole or give Callender the postmaster position. Scorned, Callender sought a position with a Federalist newspaper and began publishing anti-Republican stories.

in the country for a short period of time before they had to either free them or send them home (151). If masters did not do either of those things, “slaves could petition the Admiralty Court, where they invariably won their freedom” (151). Many historians suggest that Hemings could have chosen to stay in Paris instead of going back to the United States with Jefferson (“Sally Hemings”). These laws prove that Jefferson was exposed to a national abolitionist movement while living in France. As mentioned, Jefferson also had to contend with the Haitian Revolution during his presidency. Jefferson “did all he could to undermine the black republic in Haiti, including offering aid to Napoleon in his futile effort to reconquer the island and reimpose slavery. The existence of a free black republic just off the American coast... unnerved Jefferson” (Finkelman 206). Although Jefferson chose to remain silent on the issue of ending slavery, he was vocal in the face of maintaining the status quo.

It was among these and many other different points of contention that, in August of 1808 as his presidency neared its end, Jefferson received a letter from Henri Grégoire, a French revolutionary and priest who was friends with many prominent Republicans in the Americas (Sepinwall 319). Grégoire was a staunch abolitionist who attempted to spread democracy and republicanism all around the New World while also investing heavily in the promotion of equal rights and universal suffrage (319). Along with his letter, Grégoire included a copy of his book, *De la littérature des Nègres* (*The Literature of Black Writers*). In his book, Grégoire specifically attacks Jefferson’s claims in *Notes on the State of Virginia* regarding the natural intellectual capacities of black people (324). Unlike Jefferson, Grégoire argued that “historical events—particularly the brutality of slavery... had degraded blacks: ‘What sentiments of dignity, of self-respect, can possibly exist in being treated like beasts...? What can become of the individuals degraded below the level of brutes...’” (qtd in Sepinwall 324). Grégoire also attacked Jefferson

personally by arguing that “whites who claimed superiority were guided by self-interest” (324). Grégoire said, “The more imposing and respectable the authority of Jefferson... the more essential it is to combat his judgement” (qtd in Sepinwall 324). Grégoire directly argues against some of the beliefs penned by Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia* by stating that slaves are not naturally inferior but were made that way through slavery. He also attacks Jefferson by saying that his judgment must be questioned. Although Jefferson’s rational, Enlightenment perspective may agree with the need for all to be questioned, he most likely did not like being challenged on beliefs he held so closely.

Jefferson likely received Grégoire’s letter with a sense of irritation or anger. However, he was also disinclined to become involved in the matter. After eight eventful years as president, Jefferson was exhausted and excited to begin his retirement. He wrote in a letter to the minister of France, John Armstrong: “I retire from scenes of difficulty, anxiety, contending passions to the Elysium of domestic affections & the irresponsible direction of my own affairs” (Jefferson to John Armstrong, 6 March 1809).⁹ Despite his political exhaustion, Jefferson responded to Grégoire’s letter in February of 1809.

Despite the eighteen years that separated Grégoire and Banneker’s letters and the fact that Grégoire attacked Jefferson’s beliefs regarding the intellects of black people more aggressively than Banneker, who hinted at equal intellectual abilities, Jefferson’s response to Grégoire and his copy of *De la littérature des Nègres* is extremely similar to his response to Banneker and Banneker’s almanac. Both responses are very brief and their structure matches almost exactly. Jefferson thanks the sender for their letter and the piece of writing sent to him and then assures the sender that he wants to believe black people have mental capacity equal to that of other races.

⁹ Jefferson begins this letter by telling Armstrong, “This will be handed to you by Mr Coles, the bearer of public dispatches.” Jefferson and Coles would share a letter exchange regarding slavery in the years to come.

He politely concludes the letter by thanking the sender for the text they have sent him, assuring them that he appreciates their efforts.

The similarity of the letters suggests that Jefferson had developed a standard strategy for addressing critical attacks regarding his racism and his position as a slaveholder that focuses on brevity and courtesy rather than direct or detailed discussion or engagement. This approach was likely informed by the controversy surrounding his relationship with Hemings, which shadowed Jefferson throughout his entire presidency and taught him to remain discrete on matters related to race and slavery.

The opening lines of Jefferson's letters to Grégoire and Banneker are particularly noteworthy because they are nearly identical. To Grégoire, Jefferson says, "Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them [black people] by nature..." (Jefferson to Grégoire, 25 February 1809). This language closely follows Jefferson's response to Banneker, where he states that, "No body wishes more than I do, to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren talents equal to those of the other colors of men" (Banneker 11). The extreme similarity between Jefferson's response to Banneker and his response to Grégoire calls the sincerity of Jefferson's sentiments into question because they seem so obviously rehearsed, especially because Jefferson would later write in a letter to his friend, well-known poet Joel Barlow that he "wrote him [Grégoire]... a very soft answer" (Jefferson to Barlow, 8 October 1809).

Jefferson goes on to tell Grégoire that he drew his conclusions regarding the intelligence of black people through a rational, scientific approach rooted in his own observations. Jefferson says, "My doubts were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own State,

where the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favorable, and those of exercising it still less so” (Jefferson to Grégoire, February 1809). This statement reinforces the idea that Jefferson believed he remained scientific and objective while writing *Notes* and when making judgements on the abilities of black people. These remarks may have been purposely used to counter Grégoire’s statements that any differences in the intellects of black people are caused by oppressive social structures such as slavery.

It is notable that although Jefferson tells Grégoire that he “wishes” he were wrong about “the grade of understanding” that naturally belonged to black people, he never rescinds the statements he made in *Notes* or says that his conclusions were false. Jefferson is continually polite, vague, and elusive. He goes on to say that he “expressed [his claims in *Notes* regarding black people] with great hesitation, but whatever be their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights.” This statement is most likely a direct response to Grégoire’s assertion in his book that Jefferson was close-minded regarding black people. Jefferson would later write to Joel Barlow that “it was impossible for doubt to have been more tenderly or hesitatingly expressed than that was in *Notes of Virginia*, and nothing was or is farther from my intentions than to enlist myself as the champion of a fixed opinion, where I have only expressed a doubt” (Jefferson to Barlow, 8 October 1809). Jefferson’s letter to Barlow once again highlights Jefferson’s stated intent to remain rational and scientific in his beliefs. By saying that he does not have a fixed opinion, Jefferson implies that he can be swayed if presented with factual evidence.

While Jefferson does not directly disavow his assertions of racial inequality in *Notes*, he continues to discuss the rights of black people by optimistically pointing to the improvements in social standing and recognition of black people that Grégoire was eager for Jefferson to recognize. Jefferson tells Grégoire that he believes, “On this subject they are gaining daily in the

opinions of nations, and hopeful advances are making towards their reestablishment on equal footing with the other colors of the human family” (Jefferson to Grégoire, 25 February 1809). Jefferson is most likely referring to shifts in society to provide minorities, especially black people, with expanded rights, such as the slave rebellion in Haiti or the successful ending of the slave trade in the British empire. Jefferson goes on to say, “I pray you therefore to accept my thanks for the many instances you have enabled me to observe of the respectable intelligence in that race of men, which cannot fail to have effect in hastening the day of their relief...” This sentence suggests Jefferson is listening to Grégoire’s assertion that black people are equally intelligent to other races because he acknowledges the intelligence displayed in Grégoire’s book. However, Jefferson is also vague about what specifically he is grateful to Grégoire for, and would write to Barlow that Grégoire’s “credulity has made him gather up every story he could find of men of colour (without distinguishing whether black, or of what degree of mixture) however slight the mention, or light the authority on which they are quoted” (Jefferson to Barlow, 8 October 1809). Jefferson’s letter to Barlow illustrates how little he meant in his “soft” answer to Grégoire.

Jefferson was eager to retire and leave the public sphere by the time he responded to Grégoire’s letter, so it is perhaps no surprise that he did not take up Grégoire’s call to action to work to end the oppression of black people. The chances of Jefferson renouncing his racist beliefs decreased with each year of his retirement. He would even write that he “had for a long time ceased to read newspapers or pay any attention to public affairs, confident they were in good hands, and content to be a passenger in our bark to the shore from which I am not distant” (Jefferson to Holmes, 22 April 1820). Grégoire’s letter and book contained the boldest critique of Jefferson as well as the most assertive call to action Jefferson had yet received, yet Jefferson

smoothly avoided a direct answer to Grégoire. Grégoire and Jefferson had a mutual friend in Joel Barlow, but Jefferson was not personally acquainted with the French abolitionist (Sepinwall 317). People who had more familiar relationships with Jefferson would ask him to help with the emancipation of slavery during his retirement, and the difference in Jefferson's responses further suggests that audience played an important role in the way Jefferson responded to questions regarding slavery. One such letter was written in 1814 by a young politician named Edward Coles.

IV. Edward Coles: A Personal Appeal

Jefferson's 1814 exchange with Edward Coles further illuminates Jefferson's unwillingness to engage with the subject of slavery when challenged, and this letter particularly illuminates how audience affected Jefferson's writing since Coles was a personal acquaintance of Jefferson, in contrast to Banneker and Grégoire whom Jefferson never met. In this letter, Coles boldly asks Jefferson to take a stance against slavery and help him write a plausible plan for the emancipation of black people. Coles was born into a wealthy, slave-owning family in Albemarle County, the same county Jefferson called home (Boles 473). In 1807, Coles' father died and left him a plantation and around twenty slaves (473). Between the time he inherited the slaves and his letter to Jefferson in 1814, Coles was also involved in politics, serving as James Madison's private secretary during the first term of his presidency from 1810 to 1815. Coles and Jefferson were familiar with each other's families and exchanged polite letters, but they were not close friends. Several letters document Jefferson asking small favors of Coles while Coles worked as Madison's private secretary.¹⁰ The letters clearly show their relationship to be a professional and

¹⁰ Surviving transcripts of the letters sent between Jefferson and Coles can be found at Founders Online. There are ten letters which date between February 16, 1810 and November 21, 1814.

impersonal one in which Jefferson mostly asks for Coles to bring items from Washington D.C. to Monticello during his travels.

Despite the fact that Coles was a slave owner, he became a vehement abolitionist during his time at William & Mary College. Coles said that while attending a class taught by James Madison and the Bishop of Virginia, Coles asked the bishop, “how can man be made the property of man? He [the bishop] frankly admitted it could not rightfully be done... Was it right to do what we believed to be wrong, because our forefathers did it?... As to the difficulty of getting rid of our slaves, we could get rid of them with much less difficulty than we did the King of our forefathers” (qtd in Ketcham 47-48). Coles “decided that he had to act to end slavery, not just in his own life but in the South as a whole” (Boles 473). Coles chose to write to Jefferson to push him on the subject of abolition at least in part because of an 1806 Virginian law that banned owners from freeing slaves. Although Congress prohibited the slave trade in 1806, many states made efforts to end the importation of slaves before the national government’s ban went into effect in 1808 (Mason 61-62). Virginia passed its own law that banned the importation of slaves but also declared that any freed slaves would be forced to leave the state (Shepherd). The law states

That if any slave hereafter emancipated shall remain within this commonwealth more than twelve months after his or her right to freedom shall have accrued, he or she shall forfeit all such right, and may be apprehended and sold by the overseers of the poor of any county or corporation in which he or she shall be found... (Shepherd article 10)

Although this law was the beginning of abolition in the state and prompted “a sudden surge of emancipations in the spring of 1806, as well as a race by free blacks to register and prove their manumissions prior to that year,” it also made it more difficult for empathetic slaveowners such

as Coles to free their slaves because the freed slaves could be captured and re-enslaved (Library of Virginia). Coles' family members used this law to discourage him from freeing his slaves because his "slaves were intermarried and otherwise related...the exile of the freed slaves would cause severe personal distress" (Ketcham 49). Knowing that he could not keep people enslaved, Coles chose to write to Jefferson for advice.

Aware that Jefferson had previously attempted to change slavery laws in Virginia, Coles likely knew that Jefferson supported some version of emancipation because he had almost certainly read *Notes on the State of Virginia* as a student at William and Mary College. Based on this background, Coles wrote Jefferson on July 31, 1814 asking for his advice and help in the matter of slavery—both on principle and in the very particular context of what Coles should do with the slaves he owned. In this letter, Coles is also more daring than either Banneker or Grégoire and specifically asks Jefferson to help him end slavery across the United States.

In many ways, Coles' letter to Jefferson is similar to Banneker's letter even though it came over two decades after Banneker and Jefferson's exchange. Coles roots his arguments in much of the same logic used by Banneker by relying on Enlightenment principles. Jefferson's response begins similarly to his response to Banneker and Grégoire by saying that he wants to believe black people are equal to white people. By the end of the letter, however, he specifically repeats claims from *Notes on the State of Virginia* that black people are born inferior to other races. This is distinct from Jefferson's letters to Banneker and Grégoire where he never directly re-states the beliefs about black people he wrote in *Notes*.

Throughout his letter to Jefferson, Coles appeals to the retired President by using logic and emotion in fairly equal amounts. Similar to Banneker, Coles is aware that he is writing to a man far more powerful and respected than himself. Although Coles certainly enjoyed a more

elevated social position than Banneker and worked within similar political orbits as Jefferson, he still begins his letter by acknowledging the elevated status of the man he is addressing. Coles writes, “I never took up my pen with more hesitation or felt more embarrassment than I now do... The fear of appearing presumptuous distresses me... had I not the highest opinion of your goodness and liberality, in not only excusing me for the liberty I take, but in justly appreciating my motives in doing so” (Coles to Jefferson, 31 July 1814). Coles recognizes the delicate subject he is breaching, and by telling Jefferson that he is aware of the sensitivity of the topic, he also shows how important the matter is to him. By acknowledging Jefferson’s elevated status, Coles indicates that he respects Jefferson immensely. Coles also recognizes Jefferson’s expertise on matters of the rights of men and states that “these things are better understood by you than by me” (Coles). By showing an understanding of Jefferson’s knowledge and familiarity with matters regarding Enlightenment principles, Coles shows himself to be humble and willing to accept Jefferson’s answers while also asserting his own intelligence and competence.

After Coles hints at the topic he wishes to discuss with Jefferson, he directly states his request that Jefferson assist him in creating a working plan to emancipate slaves. Coles says, “My object is to entreat and beseech you to exert your knowledge and influence, in devising, and getting into operation, some plan for the gradual emancipation of Slavery” (Coles to Jefferson, 31 July 1814). In recognizing Jefferson’s knowledge and influence, he continues the established tone of respect and near reverence for his elder. However, Coles also asks Jefferson to leave his retirement and rejoin the political world by combatting slavery, pushing him to take a bolder stance on this issue than he had ever taken before. The strong stance Coles asks Jefferson to take aligns with what Coles said about his own process of becoming an abolitionist. Coles strongly believed that “If he could not reconcile Slavery with his principles, & did not believe men could

have a property in his fellowman, he ought not to hold Slaves” (Ketcham 48). Coles perhaps felt Jefferson was the best person to approach for this task not only because Jefferson was respected throughout the country, but also because Jefferson had a history of considering and proposing the rights of black people that dated back to his time as a young lawyer and legislator in Virginia.¹¹ However, what Coles asked Jefferson to do was far more definitive than any stance Jefferson had ever taken on slavery during his career.

Coles also argues that Jefferson is the most accomplished and qualified person for the role because of his status as a founder of the United States. Coles tells Jefferson, “This difficult task could be less exceptionably, and more successfully performed by the revered Fathers of all our political and social blessings, than by any succeeding statesmen” (Coles to Jefferson, 31 July 1814). Coles frames the claim that established politicians and American founders were better suited for the task of emancipating slavery than young lawmakers as an appeal to Jefferson’s wisdom. By noting Jefferson’s advanced wisdom and knowledge, Coles is also appealing to Jefferson’s ego and his awareness of his historical importance. Gordon-Reed writes, “It is likely that very few Americans have had a keener sense that he or she would have a place in history than Jefferson. He firmly believed that the American Revolution, and what he saw as his rescue of the Revolution in 1800, were new things under the sun” (4). Jefferson was always aware of the impact he would have on world history, and Coles seems very aware of that fact and makes it a part of his argumentative strategy.

In a move that is again similar to Banneker’s letter to Jefferson, Coles next chooses to address Jefferson’s philosophical beliefs and point out the logical connection between

¹¹ Although Jefferson was certainly particular with the rights of black people that he chose to defend, he did make a few efforts early in his career to assist black people. In 1770, Jefferson supported the plea of a mixed race servant named Samuel Howell (Boles 28). In 1769 as a junior legislator, Jefferson attempted to overturn a Virginian law that did not allow slave owners to set their slaves free (28). Jefferson references this attempt in his response to Coles.

Enlightenment thinking and abolition of slavery. Coles tells Jefferson that creating a plan for emancipation is “a duty, as I conceive, that devolves particularly on you, from your known philosophical and enlarged view of subjects, and from the principles you have professed and practiced through a long and useful life” (Coles to Jefferson, 31 July 1814). By using Jefferson’s beliefs and words to show him how inconsistent his views on slavery are, Coles demands that Jefferson be directly involved in the emancipation of slavery throughout the United States. Coles goes on to detail the “long and useful life” Jefferson has lived by pointing to his position as the “foremost in establishing on the broadest basis the rights of man, and the liberty and independence of your Country, as in being throughout honored with the most important trusts by your fellow citizens, whose confidence and love you have carried with you into the shades of old age and retirement” (Coles). Here, Coles directly points to Jefferson’s accomplishments and his position as an Enlightenment thinker to reinforce the idea that Jefferson should help create a plan to emancipate enslaved people. Coles also appeals to Jefferson’s ego by reminding him of the trust and love felt for him by American citizens.

Coles builds on his argument by appealing to Jefferson’s awareness of the impact he will have on future generations. Coles states, “For however highly prized and influential your opinions may now be, they will be still much more so when you shall have been snatched from us by the course of nature” (Coles to Jefferson, 31 July 1814). Yet again, Coles appeals to Jefferson’s ego by suggesting that, although he was already well-known and loved, he could be even more so if he worked with Coles to eliminate slavery in Virginia and throughout the United States. Coles is also reminding Jefferson of the effect his words and actions would have on future generations of Americans. Coles furthers this point by telling Jefferson that if he worked to rid the nation of slavery, “at some future day... your memory will be consecrated by a grateful

posterity, what influence, irresistible influence will the opinions and writings of Thomas Jefferson have on all questions connected with the rights of man, and of that policy which will be the creed of your disciples” (Coles). Not only does Coles tell Jefferson that if he helps abolish slavery he will be remembered, he also reinforces to Jefferson that he will be remembered for Enlightenment ideals he championed and believed in. Coles continues to use Jefferson’s momentous historical influence as he tries to convince Jefferson to take a definite stand on slavery.

Coles ends his letter with an appeal to Jefferson’s love of his home state and his nation as a whole by saying that the only option Coles sees in front of him is to leave the state with the enslaved people he owns and free them. Coles tells Jefferson because he has “feelings so repugnant to it [slavery], as to decide me not to hold them; which decision has forced me to leave my native state, and with it all my relations and friends.” This emotional threat from Coles attacks Jefferson’s love of his home state—the love that prompted Jefferson to write *Notes*. Coles aligns his own values with Jefferson’s and states that it is because of his knowledge of “the rights appertaining to Man” that he must be “principled against Slavery” (Coles to Jefferson, 31 July 1814). By pointing out the fallacy of Jefferson’s published beliefs and his position as a slaveowner, Coles once again makes a move similar to Banneker while also pushing for a bolder and more aggressive response from Jefferson.

Jefferson’s response to Coles is fascinating because, although Coles and Banneker present him with similar arguments, Jefferson’s response to the two men differs greatly in how directly he states his beliefs on the intellect and abilities of black people. Perhaps Jefferson chooses to be more explicit because he knows his political career and life are coming to an end. However, his answer to Coles may also have been influenced by his familiarity with Coles.

Jefferson may have assumed that because Coles was a Virginian with similar political beliefs to his, he would not ridicule Jefferson's true beliefs.

Jefferson's reply to Coles was written on August 25, less than a month after Coles' letter was postmarked. The beginning of Jefferson's letter echoes the response he gave Banneker and Grégoire because it is very polite and vague, stating that he wishes he were wrong about the intellectual capacity of black people. He begins by complimenting Coles on the humanity he shows himself to possess because he wishes to end slavery. Jefferson says, "the sentiments breathed thro' the whole [letter] do honor both the head and heart of the writer... the love of justice & the love of country plead equally the cause of these people [enslaved black people], and it is a mortal reproach to us that they should have pleaded so long in vain" (Jefferson to Coles, 25 August 1814). Jefferson aligns himself with Coles' critical views of slavery by agreeing that slavery is an injustice and that fighting against it is a noble cause. However, Jefferson is also fairly vague about his own beliefs. He says that his opinions on "the subject of the slavery of negroes have long since been in possession of the public, and time has only served to give them stronger root" (Jefferson). It is notable that Jefferson never feels the need to clarify what his feelings personal feelings regarding slavery are and instead focuses on the fact that his views are widely available to the public. Jefferson writes in a way that seems to paint him as sympathetic to Coles' pleas to end slavery, but his equivocations also protect Jefferson from potential claims of detractors calling him a hypocrite.

After telling Coles that he agrees with him about the immorality of slavery, Jefferson goes on to explain to Coles why he thinks it best to leave the subject of slavery alone. Jefferson tells Coles that he had not long been part of the American government before he "saw that

nothing was to be hoped” to relieve black people from oppression. Jefferson goes on to detail a previous attempt to help black people and says:

In the first or second session of the legislature after I became a member, I drew to this subject [the degradation of black slaves] the attention of Col Bland, one of the oldest, ablest, and most respected members, and he undertook to move for certain moderate extensions of the protection of the laws to these people. I seconded his motion, and, as a younger member, was more spared in the debate: but he was denounced as an enemy to his country, & was treated with the grossest indecorum. (Jefferson to Coles, 25 August 1814)

This passage illustrates how Jefferson’s fear of public rebuke—specifically rebuke from white, slave-owning men—affected his stance on slavery. Here, he emphasizes how Colonel Bland’s efforts to pass laws to protect black people cost him his political career, despite the fact that he had been a well-respected member of the legislature.¹² Jefferson never made significant efforts at emancipation again after seeing how Colonel Bland was treated by members of the Virginia legislature. Jefferson’s reference in his letter to Coles of the treatment of Colonel Bland is a false dilemma because he suggests that he would be treated in a way similar to Bland. However, by 1814 Jefferson was a Founding Father, author of the Declaration of Independence, retired diplomat, constitutional framer, skilled politician, and retired president (among other distinctions). To suppose that his treatment would have been the same as that of Colonel Bland if Jefferson rejected slavery in 1814 does not hold up to examination.

¹² Jefferson’s unfinished autobiography notes that Jefferson “made one effort in that body for the permission of the emancipation of slaves, which was rejected: and indeed, during the regal government, nothing liberal could expect success” (qtd in the footnotes of Jefferson to Coles, 25 August 1814).

Jefferson next asserts that emancipation cannot be accomplished because white people don't care enough about the freedom of black people to make a difference. He says his discussions with young white people have mostly consisted of "general silence which prevails on this subject... indicating an apathy unfavorable to every hope, yet the hour of emancipation is advancing in the march of time. It will come" (Jefferson to Coles, 25 August 1814). Here, Jefferson implies that his personal silence on the matter of slavery does not matter because the people who will soon be coming into political power do not care about the issue of slavery. In referencing the perceived apathy of those around him, Jefferson attempts to absolve himself of any responsibility for the plight of black people. He also ends this claim with an uncharacteristically short clause: "It will come," which is surely meant to pacify Coles and inject him with the same sense of passivity Jefferson feels on the subject. Or, perhaps, if not meant to teach Coles apathy, then this sentence at least suggests that he should leave the retired president alone and seek answers or engagement from future leaders, not those of the past. Jefferson also implies that he believes his legacy is complete and he does not need to add to it by fighting for the emancipation of slaves.

At this point in his letter, Jefferson returns to the racist views he first penned in *Notes* by claiming that free black people cannot be trusted with even their own freedom. He begins this by referencing "the bloody process of St Domingo" (Jefferson to Coles, 25 August 1814). Jefferson is referring to the extremely bloody Haitian Revolution of 1804, which was one of the only successful slave revolutions even though it resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths of both black and white people (Shen). Jefferson did not support the Haitian Revolution, in fact, he actively fought against it, probably because he did not believe that black people could be free without endangering white people. Jefferson often referred to the continuation of slavery as

having “the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation the other” (Jefferson to Holmes, 22 April 1820). As Jefferson wrote in *Notes*, he did not believe black people would be able to forgive white people for enslaving them if they were released. He then goes on to discuss the emancipation plans he first details in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Jefferson suggests that slave children be taken away and educated by the state until they are able to live on their own, at which point they should be sent away to another colony. Jefferson says this plan would “lessen the severity of the shock” felt by the American economy and by the black people who, Jefferson believed, would not know how to function as free people.

Within the letter, there is a major shift where Jefferson goes from talking about the beliefs he has already stated regarding the natural intelligence of black people to admitting that social or cultural causes may have caused inequalities in intellect, an argument presented to him by Grégoire. Jefferson states that it is because of white people that black people are incompetent. This admission is an interesting complication to Jefferson’s usual beliefs because he had always written that black people were born inferior to white people. However, Jefferson says that because black people have been “brought up from their infancy without necessity for thought or forecast, are by their habits rendered as incapable as children of taking care of themselves... in the mean time they are pests in society by their idleness, and the depredations to which this leads them.” These statements support the argument Jefferson makes about the uselessness of freeing slaves because they will only be a burden on white society since they lack the ability to be productive unless they are forced into labor.

Jefferson ends his letter by scrubbing himself of responsibility for the plight of slaves. He tells Coles that although he is “sensible of the partialities with which” Coles has “looked towards

me as the person who should undertake this salutary but arduous work,” but asking Jefferson to leave his retirement to help is similar to a young soldier forcing an old hero to put his armor on and rejoin the fight while there are able-bodied men watching (Jefferson to Coles, 25 August 1814).. By using this analogy, Jefferson’s comparison makes Coles seem weak and careless—a young man who is not ambitious enough to achieve his goals and instead relies on an old man. Jefferson continues, “I have overlived the generation with which mutual labors and perils begat mutual confidence and influence. This enterprise is for the young; for those who can follow it up, and bear it through to it’s [sic] consummation.” Jefferson purposely diminishes the social and political power he has by claiming that, because he is not young and would not be able to see the end of slavery, his blessing of abolishing the practice would be worthless. He builds on this point by using another unusually short sentence: “It shall have all my prayers, and these are the only weapons of an old man.” Jefferson says that he will support Coles’ cause privately—even though his private life has been at odds with some of his statements on slavery and racism. By reducing himself to an “old man” who has no power beyond prayers, Jefferson once again tries to remove himself from the situation.

Once Jefferson has discouraged Coles from trying to convince him to help end slavery, he moves on to refute Coles’ suggestion that one of the only options left before him is to leave Virginia and free his slaves. Jefferson asks Coles, “are you right in abandoning this property, and your country with it?” (Jefferson to Coles, 25 August 1814). Jefferson was most likely deeply offended by the suggestion that Coles would need to leave Virginia to free his slaves. Jefferson answers his own question by saying, “I think not. My opinion has ever been that, until more can be done for them, we should endeavor, with those whom fortune has thrown on our hands, to feed and clothe them well, protect them from ill usage, require such reasonable labor only as is

performed voluntarily by freemen.” Jefferson suggests that it is better for Coles’ slaves if they remain enslaved because Coles will be able to care for them and make sure they only work as much as a free man would. Finally, Jefferson reminds Coles that “The laws do not permit us to turn them loose, if that were for their good.” Jefferson appeals to Coles’ moral code as well as his duty as a citizen to try and convince him that leaving Virginia and freeing his slaves is not a viable option.

The argument Jefferson presents to Coles is very different from the letters he sent Banneker and Grégoire because he reverts back to overt racist thinking rather than choosing to provide a vague response for which he cannot be criticized. Jefferson explicitly refuses to take a stronger stance on slavery than he has in the past. When he wrote Banneker and Grégoire, Jefferson chose to not even address his stance on slavery but focused instead on his wishes that black people be treated better. Although Jefferson begins his letter to Coles with the same tone, he quickly reverts to racism by telling Grégoire that he should not free his slaves or campaign for the emancipation of slaves elsewhere.

There were certainly many factors that contributed to Jefferson’s less delicate response to Coles such as his comfortable retirement or the fact that he had already politically and socially passed his zenith. One potentially substantial factor could also be his familiarity with Coles. While Banneker and Grégoire were both almost completely unknown to Jefferson, Coles and Jefferson were neighbors who shared political and social connections. While they most likely were not good friends, they at least knew of one another and had encountered one another in social situations. This is perhaps why we see a return of claims from Jefferson similar to the ones he made in *Notes on the State of Virginia*—specifically the suggestions that black people are incompetent and cannot function as free people in society. However, it is noticeable that

throughout the letter, Jefferson uses both the avoidant formality seen in his responses to Grégoire and Banneker and his beliefs in *Notes*. It is also notable that he does seem to consider some of Grégoire's arguments despite maintaining the belief that slaves should not be freed.

Part of Jefferson's refusal to renounce slavery is almost certainly due to his financial position in 1814. Crop yields were low and Jefferson desperately needed his slaves to support him financially. He left the presidency deeply in debt. Part of this debt resulted from the fact that his nail factory did not do well while he was president because Jefferson was not able to supervise it (Boles 473). To compound the financial reasons Jefferson did not want to free his slaves, his honesty also probably resulted from the fact that he was utterly exhausted from his presidency and had no desire to rejoin public life. Perhaps, because Jefferson had attained his political goals, he no longer worried as much about what his opponents would say about him.

V. Conclusion: Jefferson, Audience, and Honesty

By studying both the history surrounding Thomas Jefferson and analyzing his writing from a literary perspective, we discover the impact that audience had on the way Jefferson wrote about race and slavery. Based on Jefferson's role as a slaveholder and the fact that he consistently refused to disavow his claims in *Notes* about intellectual inequality between black and white people, we can assume that, although Jefferson was willing to consider the plight of black people, he was not convinced by Banneker, Grégoire, or Coles's arguments that black and white people are equal. Despite the fact that he probably did not seriously consider the statements of any of these three men, the way he communicated with them varied greatly based on his familiarity with the audience to whom he wrote. The issue of familiarity is also crucial in *Notes*

on the State of Virginia because the book was published for a limited audience that Jefferson knew well.

Although *Notes* was intended for a small audience, the argument regarding audience is somewhat complicated because Jefferson could have published a revised version of *Notes* after it became widely circulated—he updated *Notes* constantly as he received new information on geography or natural occurrences. The fact that he did not publish a revised edition suggests that Jefferson was, to some extent, comfortable with having his views on black people and slavery publicized despite the criticism he received. Jefferson’s response to Grégoire especially reveals how Jefferson responds to criticism of the views he published in *Notes*. Certainly, part of Jefferson’s assuredness results from his confidence in what he considered to be unbiased and scientific observations. Jefferson’s awareness of audience suggests that he cared more about his political career than racial equality. Jefferson specifically references this in his letter to Coles when he discusses Colonel Bland’s political demise. Jefferson’s writing also suggests that he was aware that his views were problematic despite the fact that he was reluctant to change them.

Although we will never be able to completely understand Jefferson’s true views on slavery or race, puzzling together what Jefferson reveals in his writing is crucial because it teaches us about the rhetoric Jefferson used as a politician that is still in use today in the United States. Most national leaders choose not to attempt discussions of race (Johnson 175). One study from Coe and Schmidt analyzed presidential “addresses from Roosevelt to the first 2 years of the Obama administration” and found that the “vast majority of major presidential addresses make no mention of race whatsoever” (qtd in Johnson 175-176). When he was elected as the first black president in 2008, many people expected President Barack Obama to speak openly on issues of race, yet he consistently stayed quiet. When Obama did speak about race following the arrest of

Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates in 2009, he was accused by conservative talk show host Glenn Beck as “a guy... who has a deep-seated hatred for White people, or the White culture” (qtd in Johnson 175). Following the backlash, Obama maintained a tendency to remain silent on matters of race. As Obama neared the end of his second term as president, his willingness to engage on matters of race shifted in a way that is similar to Jefferson at the end of his life as Obama became more willing to openly discuss matters of race. In his 2015 speech commemorating the marches from Selma to Montgomery, Obama spoke about the events in Ferguson following the death of Michael Brown and openly stated, “we can make sure our criminal justice system serves all and not just some” (qtd in Johnson 181). This differed from Obama’s previous speeches, in which he consistently reminded African Americans that “Government alone cannot get our children to the Promised Land” (qtd in Johnson 178). Perhaps part of this is also because Obama was “speaking primarily to African Americans” (179). When speaking on race, audience and the point one is at in one’s political career seem to have an important effect on rhetoric.

Ultimately, Thomas Jefferson’s stance on race is fairly simple. Jefferson was a racist who believed black people were inferior to white people. However, the way Jefferson discusses and thinks about race remains complicated. When we study letters sent to audiences with whom Jefferson had varying degrees of familiarity, we expand our understanding of this founder. We see that, although he was racist, he was also willing to take into consideration differing views on race and equality. We can also observe that, while Jefferson believed in liberty, he was not willing to submit his political or personal life to the upheaval that taking a definite stance either for or against slavery would have wrought upon his career. Understanding Thomas Jefferson

helps us understand the formation of our country, and studying his rhetoric assists us in a more thorough comprehension of racial issues in the United States.

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Reflective Writing:**Word Count: 1043**

I was excited and scared to write about Thomas Jefferson once I made the decision to do so. Similar to many children who went through the public school system, I have idolized Jefferson since I was very young. However, as I went through secondary and post-secondary schooling, I learned how problematic Jefferson's views on race and slavery were, both in a modern context and in the context of American revolutionaries, many of whom were more progressive on the issue of slavery than Jefferson ever was. Like many others (both in a modern context and in the context of the early United States), I was confused by the paradoxes exhibited by Jefferson. It was with the intent to better understand Jefferson that I decided to embark on a capstone project focused on race and Thomas Jefferson. I had a suspicion that I would find Jefferson to be a racist slaveholder, but I hoped to complicate my understanding of him during my research and analysis. Writing this capstone project is a fitting end for my undergraduate career because it gave me the opportunity to research and analyze the complicated subject of Thomas Jefferson's beliefs on race on a scale that I had not yet performed. This capstone has added to my education because it gave me the opportunity to alter my own views on Jefferson as I researched and analyzed. Initially, I began the project hoping that I would find Jefferson to actually believe what he wrote in the Declaration of Independence and in letters to Benjamin Banneker or Henri Grégoire. Instead, my capstone taught me that I needed to change my own perspective and accept that although Jefferson was a complicated figure with complicated views he was, ultimately, a racist.

I was only able to draw the conclusions that I drew because of my mentor, Dr. Keri Holt. I initially discovered that Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence (which he believed should not have been altered—he kept a copy of the original draft in his autobiography

along with notes regarding the changes to his original) denounced slavery as an evil brought to the Americas by the British in Dr. Holt's Early American Literature. Although this language was eliminated from the eventual Declaration of Independence, reading this document gave me some hope that Jefferson's stance on slavery was more complicated than it seemed when one only considered his position as a lifelong slaveholder who did not release his slaves upon his death. Dr. Holt's expertise and knowledge of subjects pertaining to race in the early United States helped me develop a more complex argument regarding Jefferson, and I would have been completely lost without her. The opportunity I had to work with Dr. Holt during the research, drafting, and revision phases of my capstone made me a better researcher and taught me to ask better questions and always find more information.

The Boles biography I consulted throughout the process of writing my capstone was quick to point to some letters as proof that Jefferson was not racist. While it would have been easy to take Jefferson's letters at face value, critical thinking was crucial to the outcome of my project. Had I chosen not to do more in-depth research by reading other letters written by Jefferson and referring to literary studies, the conclusions I drew would have been completely different. However, because I have been taught during my undergraduate education that analyzing the way in which something is written is important, I was able to dive deeper into Jefferson's prose and find a more complicated answer to my initial research question.

When I began work on this project, I didn't realize how difficult the writing process would be. I naively assumed I would be able to write a complete draft of my capstone by the end of January and then work on revisions until March. Instead of writing everything at once, I wrote my capstone in five sections, focusing on one work at a time. I began with the sections I felt most comfortable analyzing and making claims about (*Notes on the State of Virginia* and the

Benjamin Banneker letter) and then moved on to letters I was less comfortable with (Henri Grégoire and Edward Coles) before finishing by writing the conclusion and introduction paragraphs. Writing the paper in smaller sections helped make a project of this length more manageable than it would have if I had written it all at once. I also feel that by focusing on one section at a time, I was able to give more thought to each section, which helped me to more fully develop my ideas and refer to more literary scholarship regarding Jefferson and issues of race. With each section, I submitted an outline, rough draft, and revised draft to Dr. Holt. Working in this format gave me the opportunity to receive feedback from her at nearly every stage of the writing process, which allowed me to have a nearly completed and well-revised product after putting all of my sections together to form one cohesive document. Writing my capstone project in small sections was different from the way I have written any other project, but I believe it was very effective for a project of this length.

During my undergraduate career, I have focused mostly on literary studies. However, writing my capstone project gave me the opportunity to learn from historians. I also had the opportunity to think more critically about issues of race than I have before. Writing about race was, at times, intimidating because I did not feel qualified to write on the topic. However, I believe that I was able to learn more about race and politics as I completed this project. I believe that writing and researching race in this way helped me engage more fully in the literary studies community that discusses race. I had the opportunity to read scholarship from writers who specialize in issues of race and Early America. Writing this capstone truly broadened my understanding both of race and Thomas Jefferson. I hope that my work will aid in the complication of Jefferson as a man who did both good and bad things, but ultimately, is an important part of the legacy of the United States.

Author Bio:

Andrea Carlquist-Sagers is an English major with an emphasis in literary studies and a minor in Political Science at Utah State University. During her undergraduate career, she especially enjoyed classes regarding federal politics in the United States and most literary analysis classes. She had the opportunity to present research on modern psychology applied to certain works of Shakespeare at the USU Fall Student Research Symposium and the Utah Conference on Undergraduate Research. She has also had the opportunity to work as a Writing Fellow, a tutor and supervisor at the Writing Center, and a Supplemental Instructor for an introductory Political Science class. She hopes to work to help people understand political rhetoric by combining her love of literary analysis and political science.