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Black and White

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Continued popular perception and past scholarly analysis of the South as a region to be mapped in black and white is not surprising, given that African slaves were brought to Virginia in 1619, a Civil War was fought over the enslavement of black people, a bloody civil rights movement was needed to end the de jure racial segregation and racial violence that followed, and much ink continues to be spilled over the de facto social segregation that lingers outside the workplace. But since the turn of the twenty-first century, many scholars have come to view this biracial rendering as a problematic “obsession,” “diverting attention from the varieties of multiracial, transnational experiences” that have equally been part of the region’s history and culture.¹ As a term, “biracial” can be restrictive because it often posits separation rather than mixing and blending of people but even more so because it may only suggest the possibility of two absolute, flattening categories in a world of complex ethnic origins and makeups. However, as we turn our attention to analyses of races and ethnic groups that have been omitted in southern studies, we should not ignore issues in black and white that are still ongoing, even as they are changing in significant ways.

During the twentieth century, scholars examined the relationship of black and white to the South in different and contested ways. Historian U. B. Phillips’s 1928 assessment contended that white supremacy, “whether expressed with the frenzy of a demagogue or maintained with a patrician’s quietude, is the cardinal test of a Southerner and the central theme of Southern history.”² Anthologies, even those published as late as the 1950s, assured that southern literature would be thought of as white as well.³ The civil rights movement ushered in a more inclusive southern literary canon, beginning with Louis D. Rubin Jr.’s *The Literary South* (1979), although black women writers were noticeably absent from his table of contents. Anthologies that followed have been progressively more inclusive. The most recent, *The Literature of the American South* (1998), edited by a more diverse team (William L. Andrews, Minrose C. Gwin, Trudier Harris, and Fred Hobson) was admirably integrated, at least as regards black and white authors, although the biracial focus persisted.

Sadly the racial revision of southern literature anthologies has been slow to result in more racially integrated southern literature classes, no doubt because the terms "South" and "southerner" still trail burdensome baggage. The enrollment demographic has everything to do with the lingering connotations of "South" and "southerner," at least in the popular imagination. As Nell Irvin Painter has pointed out, during the era of segregation, "*the South* meant white people, and *the Negro* meant black people. . . . *The South* did not embrace whites who supported the Union in the Civil War or those who later disliked or opposed segregation."⁴ For some today, both native and nonnative to the South, such limited and limiting connotations still hold. Others, both white and black, have attempted to broaden the definition of "southerner" beyond white (and racist). On the publication of *Soldier's Joy* (1989), white writer Madison Smartt Bell told a reporter for the *Atlanta Constitution* that after listening to a smooth-talking Ku Klux Klansman on a radio show and hearing of the arrest of a friend who participated in an anti-Klan demonstration, he was so angry that he began a novel set in the South, not just to denounce the Klan but to reclaim the South as a place for whites who are not racist.⁵ On the other side of the color line, African American literary critic Thadious Davis has also argued for a more inclusive redefinition of the South, asserting that the return migration of African Americans to the rural South is not just "flight from the hardships of urban life" but also "a laying claim to a culture and a region that though fraught with pain and difficulty, provides a major grounding for identity."⁶

Attempting to fit black southerners into accepted definitions of "southern culture" and their work into conventional paradigms of "southern literature" has posed unnecessary dilemmas.⁷ For some, African American interest in the South has produced limiting definitions of racial authenticity. John Oliver Killens has argued that "the people of the black South are much closer to their African roots, in its culture, its humanity, the beat and rhythms of its music, its concept of family, its dance and its spirituality."⁸ In contrast, in *Turning South Again* (2001) Houston Baker reminds those too nostalgically inclined toward the life of the folk that the South imprisoned black minds and bodies. And yet in their anthology *Black Southern Voices* (1992), Killens and Jerry W. Ward Jr. embrace the term "southern," declaring that the "Southern imagination" has always been articulated by black voices, but that these voices have been ignored. They argue that without black voices, "it is impossible to discern fully the beauty and values of Southern literature and imagination." Although Killens focuses on difference, broadly defining "the black Southern voice" as angry, in opposition to white southern

voices of “complacency and contentment,” in his 1991 study, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*, Fred Hobson points to similarities in order to bring black writers into the southern canon.⁹ Using the traditional paradigm of southern exceptionalism as outlined by southern historian C. Vann Woodward, Hobson argues that a writer such as Ernest Gaines “might be seen as the quintessential southern *writer*—with his emphasis on family and community, his essentially concrete vision, his feeling for place, his legacy of failure, poverty, defeat, and those other well-known qualities of the southern experience.”¹⁰ Other scholars have questioned such attempts at inclusion, either in definitions of “southern literature” or “southerner.” In *Inventing Southern Literature* (1998), Michael Kreyling argues that black writers, no matter their gender, will always sit uneasily in the southern canon because for them race always comes before region. Scott Romine has rightly argued in *The Real South* (2008) that, whether separatist or inclusive, such models “produce a positivist, fundamentalist model of culture that is increasingly distant from the cultural operations of the late South.”¹¹

Romine’s focus, however, is on the production of southern cultural narratives, not on specific southern places. And yet particular places are often the avenues by which contemporary African Americans find their way back to the South, which is not to say the “real South.” In Tony Grooms’s *Bombingham* (2001), a black male character speculates about the reverse migration of blacks to the South: “I can see it in their eyes when they come for a visit how much they miss down here. They always talking about country cooking. . . . Can’t they cook collards in Detroit? It’s not the collards they’re craving—it’s the whole thing. It’s home.”¹² Ernest Gaines perhaps best explains the ambivalence of African Americans to “the South” when he speaks of his own love of Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, where he grew up, but his alienation from the South as an ideological region. His nuanced response is similar to that of white writer Ellen Douglas, for whom the specificity of a locale allows for a narrative complexity that myths and stereotypes mask. When discussing the importance of “place” in her fiction, Douglas emphasized that “*place*, in the sense of the specific, is absolutely essential,” remarking, “I don’t think *regionalism* is important.”¹³

Although research that broadens race and ethnicity beyond the biracial paradigm is vital, there is still work to be done in analyzing the South in black and white. For example, New Orleans hip-hop artist Jay Electronica, who channels New York rap artists, has worried publicly that his southern background has been a “career liability.”¹⁴ Scholars might examine in more detail and complexity the contemporary relationships of blacks and whites

to the South, but also their attendant variations when age, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status are considered. I have argued elsewhere that instead of worrying about who qualifies as a “southern writer” or rigidly delimiting “southern literature,” we might more fruitfully ask questions about who is writing about the U.S. South (no matter their birthplace or residence), what stories they are telling, what images they are conjuring up, and, most important, why.¹⁵ Continued investigations of black and white can provide a fruitful rubric for the study of the U.S. South in many literary genres. Travel writing by black outsiders to the South, such as Eddy L. Harris in *South of Haunted Dreams* (1993), often springs from the intersections of stereotyped expectations and more-complex realities encountered on their travels. The discussion about and subsequent change in identification on the 2000 U.S. Census, allowing citizens to mark more than one racial category, has spurred the publication of more racially inclusive family histories and memoirs of racially mixed people, such as Thulani Davis’s *My Confederate Kinfolk* (2006) and Gregory Howard’s *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black* (1995). African American writers once reluctant or uninterested in their racially mixed ancestry, such as Neil Henry and Carrie Allen McCray, have begun searching for the white roots on their mixed family tree, and a few writers who assumed they were white, like Bliss Broyard in *One-Drop: My Father’s Hidden Life—A Story of Race and Family Secrets* (2007), are also making forays into formerly forbidden territory. Contemporary fictions about black-white relationships and racially mixed characters, such as those I highlighted in *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction since the Sixties* (2004), continue to be published and need analysis. And classic southern narratives in black and white that we thought we could not say another word about need reexamining.

Take, for example, the representation of the Jefferson-Hemings relationship and the way in which racial stereotypes have likely obscured a more complex historical narrative about white and black, master and slave.¹⁶ Cultural critic bell hooks argues that “no one seems to know how to tell the story” of white men romantically involved with slave women. The realities of white exploitation and black solidarity have made it difficult to imagine consensual sex and impossible to imagine love of any kind across the color line in the plantation South. Hooks predicts that the suppressed story, if told, would explain how sexuality could serve as “a force subverting and disrupting power relations, unsettling the oppressor/oppressed paradigm.”¹⁷ Barbara Chase-Riboud’s novel *Sally Hemings* (1979), the Merchant-Ivory-Jhabvala film *Jefferson in Paris* (1995), the Haid-Andrews TV movie *Sally Hemings*:

An American Scandal (2000), and Annette Gordon-Reed's family history, *The Hemingses of Monticello* (2008) attempt to do just that by postulating answers to the questions most often asked about the Jefferson-Hemings liaison: What attracted Thomas Jefferson to Sally Hemings? What attracted Hemings to Jefferson? Why would Jefferson give up the cosmopolitan artist Maria Cosway for a relationship with a slave? Why would Hemings leave France, where she was a free woman, to return to slavery in Virginia? Could a slave owner love a slave? Could a slave love her enslaver? That these questions are always generalized in this way—with the erasure of individual identities, as Gordon-Reed points out—illustrates the difficulty of representing such a relationship, or getting beyond what bell hooks terms the “oppressed/oppressor paradigm.”

Such a reduction of the two people to symbols of the institution of slavery and to prevailing ideas about racial identification does little to penetrate the historical mystery of their intimate relationship. While Sally Hemings would not have thought of herself as white, she may not have thought of herself as simply black or considered her identity in terms of black solidarity with African Americans of varied skin tones.¹⁸ Similarly, although Jefferson may have written in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that dark-skinned people were unattractive and intellectually inferior, he surrounded himself with racially mixed people at Monticello.¹⁹ Gordon-Reed believes that Jefferson viewed the extended Hemings family “in a light different from the one in which he viewed other enslaved people,” perhaps because they were blood kin to his wife, Martha. Gordon-Reed points out that he gave them certain freedoms within their slave status: training them to be skilled artisans, allowing them to earn their own money, and housing them away from the slaves who labored in his fields.²⁰

But the relationship between Jefferson and Hemings, who as a fourteen-year-old slave accompanied his daughter Polly to France, may never have begun had they not been together in Paris for two years. Paris brought Jefferson into close personal contact with Hemings with no wife to take care of his servants' well-being while he was foreign minister to France. Furthermore, Jefferson read French but spoke it poorly, so he may have been drawn to those in his household, like Sally and her brother James, with whom he could speak English, especially since Sally brought news from home. Perhaps most importantly, Sally Hemings was legally free in France, and for the first time in her life, she earned wages for her work. Many years later, her son Madison recounted in his reminiscences that Jefferson had to bargain with his mother to get her to return to Virginia.²¹

Thus thinking of Sally Hemings simply as a black slave does not explain her return to Monticello or Jefferson's attraction to her. Although no likeness of Sally Hemings survives, it is important to remember that she was the half sister of Jefferson's deceased wife, that she had only one-quarter African ancestry, that she was described as beautiful by both blacks and whites, and that in 1830 she was listed in the U.S. Census as white. Ironically, Chase-Riboud's novel, a medium of words, depends on the visual (Hemings's "pale complexion" and her resemblance to Jefferson's deceased wife) and the auditory (her "soft Virginia accent," described as "a relief to his ears from the harsh beauty of the French") to make the fictional case for Jefferson's attraction to Hemings, while the more visual and auditory medium of film exaggerates Hemings's African features and renders her speech as different in order to mark her slave status for viewers.²²

In contrast to the films, the novel *Sally Hemings* allows for the reader to imagine the quite likely possibility that Hemings physically resembled Jefferson's wife. In the novel, such a statement of resemblance does not depend on casting and so ironically can be more realistically evoked by the written word. In the made-for-television movie, *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal*, Sam Neil, who plays Jefferson, is mesmerized when he first sees Sally, asking his slave/servant James, Sally's brother, who she is. This scene perfectly captures the uncanny feeling Jefferson may have experienced on first seeing Hemings in Paris. Jefferson is depicted as initially glimpsing her reflection in a mirror, almost as if his wife had been brought back from the dead. Later when he verbalizes his thoughts to Sally ("You look exactly like my wife. The resemblance is uncanny"), I suspect that most viewers are struck, not by the possibility of physical similarity but by racial difference, given Carmen Ejogo's African features and skin tone (her mother is Scottish and her father Nigerian). Unlike fiction, film fixes the visual image, offering what literary critic Fredric Jameson calls "a translation" and therefore paradoxically something "closer to language" than reality in presenting a "materialized subjectivity."²³ But both filmic and fictional representations of racially mixed people warrant closer examination.

Leni Sorenson, a researcher at Monticello and historical consultant for *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal*, thought that Ejogo, despite her beauty, was miscast. As historical consultant, Sorenson, who is herself racially mixed, raised the concern before filming began that the actress playing Hemings should have a lighter skin tone, but her suggestion was made to no avail. Sorenson was similarly dismayed about the casting of Thandie Newton in *Jefferson in Paris*, although Sorenson was not the historical consultant for

that film. Like Ejogo, Newton is half white and half black; her mother is British and her father Zimbabwean. Sorenson worries that such casting does not reflect the “nuances” of the historical truth of Hemings’s racial ancestry and so perpetuates the myth than one “can always tell if someone has African ancestry”—a myth first born of white fear of impurity and later perpetuated out of black desire for racial solidarity.²⁴

Unlike Chase-Riboud, who renders Hemings’s speech like that of the white characters in her novel, in the film *Jefferson in Paris* Ruth Praver Jhabvala creates a slave dialect for Hemings. She and her fellow British filmmakers drew a bright line between their well-spoken Jefferson and his slave, using Hemings’s highly inflected speech, ungrammatical and singsong, to remind both Jefferson and their audience of plantation life at Monticello. In making this choice, their Sally Hemings entertains Jefferson and thus becomes, as more than one reviewer noted, the stereotypical “pickaninny” distracting the master with song and dance.²⁵ Interestingly Gordon-Reed believes that speech patterns may have been one more way that Sally reminded Jefferson of Martha. Besides resembling each other physically, half sisters can resemble each other “in the tone and timbre of voice, and mannerisms.” Furthermore, Gordon-Reed points out that “even before they were together in Paris, the Hemingses and Jeffersons lived in close proximity to one another and interacted on a daily basis, creating as this did all over the South, a mixed culture of shared language, expressions, sayings, and norms of presentation.” She argues that Hemings’s “manner of speaking was probably not markedly different from either of theirs.”²⁶ The British filmmakers’ decision to render Hemings’s speech so different from Jefferson’s in *Jefferson in Paris* may stem from a desire to find as many ways as possible to remind viewers of Hemings’s slave status and surely originates in stereotypes about the “essential differences” between white masters and black slaves fostered no doubt by “conventional” renderings. A decade after *Jefferson in Paris* was released, historian Melvin Patrick Ely’s research revealed how much alike the idioms and speech patterns of slaves and masters actually were in Virginia during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²⁷

Despite filmmakers’ reliance on their audience’s senses of sight and hearing to reveal identity, racial ancestry is not always audible or visible, which Chase-Riboud emphasizes by opening her novel with the perspective of Nathan Langdon, the 1830 white census taker. He is “unnerved” by Hemings’s physical beauty and startled to discover that she is “fair enough to be his [own] mother.”²⁸ Chase-Riboud’s purpose is not so much to “insinuate into the consciousness of white readers the humanity of a people they

otherwise constructed as subhuman," which, as Ann duCille argues, was the strategy of earlier African American writers who employed the mulatta figure.²⁹ Rather Chase-Riboud creates through her description a very specific individual, Sally Hemings, whom earlier white male historians had reduced to an abstraction.

Nathan, who is half Sally's age, literally becomes addicted to her presence, returning day after day until he convinces himself he has fabricated her race on the census form, not to protect Jefferson from miscegenation, his original reason, but to protect Hemings, a freed slave, from having to leave Virginia and proximity to him. This behavior provides another possible similarity to Jefferson who, in one way or another, freed his children with Sally, but not Sally, leaving that task to his daughter. Virginia law required freed slaves to leave the state unless special permission was granted by the state legislature. In the novel, after Sally spurns Nathan when she discovers that he has falsified her race, he becomes obsessed with her and her relationship with Jefferson, interviewing all who might have met her. Thus he becomes the first in a long line of historians, amateur and professional, many determined to suppress her story, others more recently to penetrate the mystery of her allure.

Chase-Riboud's representation of the beginning of Jefferson and Hemings's sexual relationship, like the screenplays of Jhabvala and Andrews, breaks the link with a master-slave narrative of forcible sex, even as it reminds readers of Hemings's slave status. The novel complicates one-dimensional racial concerns by raising matters not only of color but also of class. A French character who does not know Sally is African American, although she does know she is a servant, admires her grace, expecting "her manners and gentleness and soft, charmingly accented French" to convey a "breeding" that will "surely attract a gentleman of property and improve her station in life." By the time Jefferson leaves Paris for Monticello in 1789, two years after Hemings's arrival, Chase-Riboud, like Tina Andrews, represents Hemings as a French lady with a southern accent, who reminds Jefferson of both the beautiful "rare objects" that he purchased in Paris and the "sweet breath" that draws him to Monticello.³⁰ In his remembrance of his mother, Madison Hemings remarked how often she spoke of life in France, proof perhaps that she was changed by her sojourn there. To one degree or another, in all the imaginative renderings of their liaison, Jefferson, like Pygmalion, creates Hemings into his ideal life partner. Gordon-Reed speculates that when Thomas Jefferson left Paris, Sally Hemings, not Maria Cosway, "represented the place and way of life he expected to return to . . . a shared universe in which he would be the unquestioned center."³¹

Interestingly neither Chase-Riboud, Jhabvala, nor Andrews suggests that Hemings's attraction to Jefferson was physical, perhaps because of the thirty-year age difference, perhaps because prevailing narratives and contemporary racial ideologies have rendered this interpretation unimaginable. Instead Chase-Riboud imagines that as a teenager far from home, Hemings sees Jefferson, a powerful man in his forties, as a protector. Jhabvala spotlights as attractive Jefferson's influential position, both at home and abroad. Andrews portrays Hemings as an eager pupil to Jefferson, a willing teacher—knowledgeable in all subjects from language and ideas to manners and haute couture. Only the historian Gordon-Reed posits that Sally may have been physically attracted to Jefferson given the physical features of her racially mixed family members and the fact that all the Hemings women had long-term relationships with either high-status white males, white workers, or racially mixed servants from other plantations. Just as the 1979 novel, the 1995 film, and the 2000 television movie exhibit the social and political concerns of their day, Gordon-Reed's 2008 interpretation of the liaison reflects America's current fascination with the racially mixed figure and scholars' willingness to move beyond the racial dichotomies of the twentieth century.

In Eric Foner's review of *The Hemingses of Monticello*, he points out that although "most scholars are likely to agree with Gordon-Reed's conclusion that Jefferson fathered Hemings's seven children (of whom three died in infancy)," he believes that her portrait of the "enduring romance" (his phrase) is questionable.³² Gordon-Reed makes the case that Jefferson's liaison with a much younger woman was not out of the ordinary, that a long-term relationship with a woman of color was within the norm of southern plantation society, and that his attraction was based on something more than sex. Gordon-Reed views Hemings's return to Virginia as reasoned, not coerced, a way for a slave simultaneously to become mistress of Monticello and to ensure her children's freedom. Has Gordon-Reed been too early influenced by her reading of Barbara Chase-Riboud's historical romance? Or has Foner's thinking been indelibly marked by the very master narrative that Gordon-Reed seeks to unsettle? What is clear is that each generation of writers, to one degree or another, continues to fashion the Jefferson-Hemings narrative in a way that reveals as much about the racial preoccupations of their own era as those of the eighteenth century.

What is equally clear in multiple renderings of the Jefferson-Hemings relationship is that there is still much to write about regarding the racially mixed black-white figure. In the novel *Half a Heart* (2000), for example, Rosellen Brown examines Miriam Vener's attempt to assuage white liberal guilt by tracking down Ronnee Reece, the child of her interracial love affair

with Eljay Reece, a music professor at a black college in Mississippi where she taught briefly during the 1960s. When she was a baby, Eljay abducted Ronnee, claiming that since she was black, she needed to grow up with her black father in New York. Brown leavens her take on contemporary racism and identity politics with the hopeful story of interracial reconciliation between mother and daughter, which takes place primarily in Houston. In *Ronnee*, Brown creates a racially mixed protagonist, who, as has been the convention, identifies as African American. But Ronnee is different in that her reunion with her white mother sets her on a course to forge a new self-concept. Brown's decision to alternate the focalization of her narrative between Miriam and Ronnee allows her to illuminate the evolution in their thinking about each other, about race relations, and perhaps most significantly about racial identity. At the end of the novel, Brown gives Ronnee two choices that earlier racially mixed protagonists did not have: the chance to have a relationship with the white parent and the opportunity to identify herself racially. The ending suggests that the growing presence of both parents in the racially mixed child's life may change the old one-drop rule, although Ronnee's conflicts show that existential angst, if not tragedy, will continue to plague racially mixed people as long as society's demand to define them as black clashes with their attempts to define themselves.

NOTES

1. Perdue and Green, *Columbia Guide*, 136; see also E. G. Anderson, "Red Crosscurrents."
2. U. B. Phillips, "Central Theme of Southern History," 31.
3. See, for example, Beatty, Watkins, and Young, *Literature of the South*. Only one black writer, Booker T. Washington, was included in the first edition. The revised edition added a few white women writers (Glasgow, Porter, Roberts, Gordon, Welty, O'Connor, Grau) but no black women. In *One Homogeneous People*, Trent A. Watts summarizes the whitewashing of southern history and literature.
4. Painter, "'The South' and 'The Negro,'" 43.
5. O'Briant, "Anger at Klan," 81.
6. Davis, "Expanding the Limits," 6.
7. Many such definitions originate from C. Vann Woodward's argument that distinguishing southern characteristics included emphasis on family and community, love of place, a concrete as opposed to abstract view of life, and a history of poverty and defeat; see *Burden of Southern History*.
8. Killens, introduction, 3.
9. J. W. Ward, preface, 5; Killens, introduction, 3.
10. F. Hobson, *Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*, 101.
11. Romine, *Real South*, 103.
12. Grooms, *Bombingham*, 131.

13. Speir, "Of Novels and the Novelist," 236.
14. Caramanica, "Hip-Hop Traditionalism."
15. See S. Jones, "Who Is a Southern Writer?," 725.
16. In Paris in September 2009, I gave a talk on this topic. A longer article, "Imagining Jefferson and Hemings in Paris," based on the talk appears in *Transatlantica*.
17. hooks, *Yearning*, 57, 58.
18. Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello*, 335. Information about Jefferson and Hemings in this paragraph and the two that follow is based on this source.
19. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 186–93.
20. Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello*, 90.
21. *Ibid.*, 299, 270. The "Reminiscences of Madison Hemings," which first appeared as "Life among the Lowly, No. 1," in the *Pike County (Ohio) Republican* on March 13, 1873, is included as an appendix in Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson*, 471–76.
22. Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings*, 90–91.
23. Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, 3.
24. Telephone interview with Leni Sorenson, Charlottesville, Virginia, October 10, 2008.
25. Zibart, Review of "Jefferson in Paris."
26. Gordon-Reed, *Hemingses of Monticello*, 284, 285.
27. See Ely, *Israel on the Appomattox*. Gordon-Reed summarizes Ely's research in *Hemingses of Monticello*, 290–95.
28. Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings*, 8.
29. DuCille, *Coupling Convention*, 8.
30. Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings*, 112, 130, 89.
31. In *The Hemingses of Monticello*, Gordon-Reed quotes Jefferson's May 11, 1788, letter to Anne Willing Bingham, which forms the basis of her argument about why Jefferson turned away from Cosway (278).
32. Foner, "Master and His Mistress."

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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