

Comments on Receiving the Thomas Jefferson Award

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Thank you, Chancellor Guskiewicz, for your continued leadership and support. Thanks also to you, Beth Moracco, for your leadership as chair of the faculty.

And many thanks to you, Lloyd Kramer, my friend, colleague, fellow Arkansas native, and staunch advocate for the humanities, for nominating me for this award.

I am grateful also to my faculty colleagues in the Department of Communication and across the university who have provided me with a nourishing and invigorating intellectual community for over 25 years.

The Thomas Jefferson Award Elevates the Significance of Race and Reckoning Work

What an honor it is to stand before you today. It is always a matter of high esteem to be recognized by one's peers. But this award—the Thomas Jefferson Award—is significant to me because it provides a platform for elevating what I think is among the most sacred and urgent work at UNC-Chapel Hill—reckoning with the legacies of systemic racism at the founding of the United States and this university to find pathways toward healing, reparations, and strengthening American democracy.

I am a Black woman, the descendant of enslaved ancestors, including my second great-grandfather Peter Walker, Sr., who, according to some preliminary archival evidence, served in the Union Army—that is to say, the United States Army—during the Civil War. Like my great-grandfather, I believe in fighting for Jefferson's ideals for our nation.

That is the work I have pursued in my writing, engaged scholarship, and service at this global public research university—the university of the people. It is through race and reckoning work that I think the university—and our nation—can make real the promises of the Jeffersonian ideals of democracy for all and the assurance of human rights and dignity.

Thomas Jefferson was a revolutionary thinker, writer, and public servant who envisioned the ideals of a true democracy. He had the opportunity to engage with race and reckoning work in his lifetime, but he chose to leave it as unfinished business for future generations to pursue.

So, in many ways, intentionally or not, Thomas Jefferson left the republic he helped to create with a clarion call to continue the revolution toward freedom for all. I think we each have an obligation to answer that call.

We Must Continue the Unfinished Work of the Promise of Democracy for All Americans

Two weeks ago, I toured Monticello, where Jefferson lived and enslaved over 400 Black women, men, and children throughout his life there. It is where he lived with Sally Hemings, an enslaved girl who became the mother of four of his children, whom he also enslaved.¹

The interpreter leading the tour at Monticello referred to “a paradox of liberty” to describe some of Jefferson’s life choices. The man who was the author of the Declaration of Independence, the foundation of our cherished democracy—ensuring life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—could not see the enslaved people at Monticello, nor native peoples, indentured servants, and women, in that vision of democracy.

However, I hardly think this seemed paradoxical to the people of Virginia and other slaveholding states who held firmly to the racist ideas of chattel slavery being used to keep cheap labor in place, enriching themselves and shoring up the fledgling republic. It probably seemed simple, straight forward, and perhaps even morally right to some of them. Nor did Jefferson’s choices likely seem paradoxical to the men, women, and children who were enslaved, and the throngs of abolitionists who were fighting that evil system of violence against humanity. The wrongness of that system was self-evident.

No, I don’t think Thomas Jefferson’s life choices were paradoxical at all. Historians have documented his racism, his belief in the segregation of races and his dehumanizing beliefs about Black people.² The people Jefferson enslaved were auctioned on his lawn to pay his debts after his death, separating families, likely sending some to violent deaths in some of the harshest labor camp conditions in the south.³

It is unfortunate that Jefferson did not *believe* that all people are created equal. However, I agree with Annette Gordon-Reed, the Pulitzer Prize nominated historian and noted Jefferson scholar who argues that Jefferson’s personal belief in equality for all is not a necessary condition for living up to the ideals of democracy that he penned and wanted for himself.

Gordon-Reed puts it this way:

Given the criticism [Jefferson] regularly receives today for not being more forceful on the question of slavery, and for being somewhat too forceful (and wrong) on the question of race,

¹ “Sally Hemings had at least six children fathered by Thomas Jefferson. Four survived to adulthood.” The Life of Sally Hemings, www.monticello.org/sallyhemings/. Accessed 20 September 2023

² See Meacham, Jon. *Thomas Jefferson: The art of power*. Random House, 2012.

³ “After Monticello.” *The 1827 Slave Auction at Monticello*, www.monticello.org/slaveauction/. Accessed 20 September 2023.

it is useful to remember that in his time, Jefferson had the reputation of being a dangerous social radical. One can easily see that putting the words "all men are created equal" into the public discourse would be frightening—even if one doubted (as many do today) Jefferson's sincerity. What was perceived then, and should be considered now, is that whether he believed to the extent that we would wish him to, is relatively unimportant. The more critical point has always been how much others would take his words to heart."⁴

In short, we are the ones who must believe in our democracy. It is up to each generation to take Jefferson's words to heart and get us closer to those ideals.

Jefferson once wrote: "To learn, you have to listen. To improve, you have to try."⁵

If we want to learn about what it means to live out the ideals of democracy, we must confront the contradictions in American rhetoric and the reality of the lives of everyday Americans. We should listen closely to the people from each generation, including Jefferson's whose very lives were a test of the democratic ideals at the foundation of our republic.

What Sally Hemings and Ella Baker Teach us about Jeffersonian Ideals of Democracy

I think we can learn much from Sally Hemings and her contemporaries and from Ella Baker, a courageous North Carolinian who worked tirelessly for democracy and who became the architect of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Sally Hemings: Fight for freedom, especially when the system is denying basic human rights.

I think that what we learn from Sally Hemings and her contemporaries is this: Fight for freedom, especially when the system is denying basic human rights.

Documenting the lives of enslaved Black folk at Jefferson's Monticello and the University of Virginia, the acclaimed historian Blair L. M. Kelly notes that,

Jefferson described the men, women and children who toiled from dawn to dusk in the shadow of his home and the university he founded...as if they were a different species altogether.... Yet the enslaved people dreamed of freedom and sought it every chance they could...⁶

For centuries, racial slavery trapped people in a system that denied their liberty and that did not recognize their humanity. But history shows that seeking pathways to freedom was a constant

⁴ Gordon-Reed, Annette. William and Mary Quarterly. Third Series, Vol. LVII, no. 1, January 2000, pp. 172-174, 179-181.

⁵ This quote is widely attributed to Jefferson, including as printed on the room key, which I was given during my recent stay at the Draftsman Hotel near the University of Virginia and Monticello. I could not find the original source documenting the quote.

⁶ Kelley, Blair Murphy. *Black folk: The roots of the Black working class*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of WW Norton, 2023, pp. 30-31.

quest in the lives of enslaved Black folk. Sally Hemings did the best she could to protect the life and dignity of her children and others in her community. She negotiated with Jefferson for the freedom of her children.⁷

In the larger Black diaspora, resistance to slavery came in many different forms. *But there was resistance.*⁸ And that knowledge—to resist—to believe in freedom—was passed down through many generations.

Ella Baker: “We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.”

That brings me to what I think we can learn from Ella Baker about living up to the Jeffersonian ideals of democracy.

Ella Baker left us with these words: *“We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.”*⁹

Raised in rural Littleton, North Carolina, in the Jim Crow South of the early 1900s, Ella Baker’s activism was honed within the Black freedom struggle, but she worked toward broad social transformation. Her belief was in the power of ordinary people and their determination to expose the bankrupt claims of White supremacy, extreme dehumanizing forms of capitalism, and patriarchy.

In the 1960s Ella Baker became the primary mentor for the students in the student nonviolent coordinating committee. She trained them in the grassroots organizing methods that she had honed decades earlier in some of the very communities the students would later enter to organize voter registration drives, defying the racist Jim Crow rules that denied Black citizens the right to vote.

She mentored notable SNCC veterans such as Bob Moses, Julian Bond, Diane Nash, and John Lewis. In 1964, Ella Baker co-founded, along with Fannie Lou Hamer and Bob Moses, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, helping to lay the groundwork for passage of the voting rights act of 1965.

Until her death in 1986 at age 83, Ella Baker was involved in more than thirty major political campaigns and organizations.

⁷ “Such is the story that comes down to me,” Madison Hemings. *The Life of Sally Hemings*, www.monticello.org/sallyhemings/. Accessed 20 September 2023

⁸ Brown, Vincent. *Tacky’s revolt: the story of an Atlantic slave war*. Harvard University Press, 2019.

⁹ Baker, Ella J. Keynote speech before the state convention of the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party, August 6, 1964. In J. Dittmer, J. Kolnick, & L. McLemore (Eds.), *Freedom summer: A brief history with documents* (p. 31), Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 2017.

She was a servant leader and educator who carried forward an intellectual tradition for grassroots organizing and social justice leadership that remains relevant today.¹⁰

Conclusion

When I look to the list of prestigious faculty colleagues who have received the Thomas Jefferson award before me, and other colleagues who have not been recognized by this award but who are certainly deserving — I see them working on the unfinished business of ensuring that our democracy lives up to its ideals of equity, access to opportunity, and the pursuit of happiness.

I accept this award in honor of those colleagues, and in honor of Ella Baker and Sally Hemings.

¹⁰ Parker, Patricia S. *Ella baker's catalytic leadership: A primer on community engagement and communication for social justice*. Vol. 2. Univ of California Press, 2020; Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black freedom movement: A radical democratic vision*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2003.