

Historical Knowledge, Historical Error

A CONTEMPORARY GUIDE TO PRACTICE

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A Case Study in Historical Epistemology: What Did the Neighbors Know about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings?

— CHAPTER SIX —

by Steven Shepard, Phillip Honenberger, and Allan Megill

In his *Outlines of the Principles of History*—a work, now almost forgotten, that was in part a treatise on historical epistemology—the nineteenth-century historian and historical theorist J. G. Droysen (1808–84) contended that history needs to make clear to itself “its aims, its means, its foundations.”¹ Among the many issues that interested Droysen was the relation between the critical and the constructive dimensions of historical research and writing. As Michael J. MacLean has emphasized, in Droysen’s view history is not just a matter of the critical examination of sources (*Kritik*), for source criticism yields only “scattered empirical fragments.” The problem is to make the leap from such fragments to, as MacLean puts it, “the durable collective expressions through which men, united in . . . various ethical communities . . . have manifested their concerted acts of will in history.”²

Droysen lived in a world radically different from ours—the world of German idealist philosophy. His way of conceptualizing the problem of moving from fragmentary source material to a wider picture of past events can no longer be ours. But the problem itself, which he articulates with admirable clarity, is with us still. It is one of the central concerns of this book. Droysen holds that historians *must* speculate. The alternative is to have no history at all, but only collections of facts. Accordingly, the question to be asked is not *Should* historians speculate? Rather, it is *How* should they speculate? Our contention—perhaps naive in its simplicity, and certainly simple in its naïveté—is that they ought to speculate honestly and intelligently. We are persuaded that in the long run it is more intelligent to be honest than deceptive or (worse) self-deceived. Our focus in the present chapter is on how to speculate intelligently; consideration of the ethics of history will be deferred to another work.

A DISPUTED CASE

On September 1, 1806, a journalist and disappointed office-seeker, James Callender, published allegations in the *Richmond Recorder* that the president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, was involved in a sexual relationship with a slave named Sally. In the two centuries following, the question as to the truth of these allegations was a matter of intermittent discussion. Callender did not further identify the person he called "this wench Sally," but she could only have been Sally Hemings (1773–1835), a household slave. It is likely that she was the half-sister of Jefferson's deceased wife, Martha Wayles Jefferson (1748–82), whose father, John Wayles, had a long-standing sexual relationship with his slave Elizabeth Hemings. (In fact, most historians who have examined the matter consider it a certainty that Sally Hemings was Martha Jefferson's half-sister.)

Among Sally Hemings's descendants there was, and continues to be, an oral tradition that she had been involved in a sexual relationship with Jefferson and that she had borne children by him. However, until recently, almost all historians who considered the matter rejected the notion that there had been any such relationship. They dismissed the idea on a variety of grounds: because Callender was not a disinterested observer but in fact wanted to harm Jefferson; because the accounts of ex-slaves from the Monticello household were inherently unreliable gossip, having no firsthand foundation; because it would have been out of character for Jefferson, a highly moral man, to have engaged in an illicit sexual relationship with a slave; and because Jefferson was too much a racist to have entered into a sexual relationship with a woman of African heritage.

Discussion of the alleged relationship between Hemings and Jefferson intensified in November 1998 when the results of tests of the DNA of nineteen known male descendants of Sally Hemings and of Jefferson's uncle, Field Jefferson, were published. (The testing was organized by Eugene A. Foster, a pathologist, and was carried out by labs in England and the Netherlands.) The tests showed, to an extremely high level of probability, that Sally Hemings's last son, Eston Hemings, was fathered by someone in the Jefferson family line.³ (It was not possible to test the fatherhood of Sally Hemings's other known children, for the test required an unbroken line of known and surviving male descendants.) Almost a year *before* the DNA test results were published, a law professor named Annette Gordon-Reed had published a book in which she examined the historical evidence for and against a Hemings–Jefferson relationship, and concluded that the evidence for such a relationship was much stronger than had usually been thought. It

is hardly surprising, then, that in the wake of the publication of the DNA results an academic conference was organized (by Peter S. Onuf of the University of Virginia) to discuss the significance of the apparent liaison between Jefferson and Hemings.⁴

This chapter began as a response by Shepard to a paper presented by Joshua D. Rothman at that conference, who argued that the newfound certainty of the Jefferson–Hemings relationship obliges us to put greater faith than historians had previously in the reports of James Callender. Specifically, Rothman contended that we ought to believe Callender's claim (in his 1802 *Richmond Recorder* article) that "there is not an individual in the neighborhood of Charlottesville who does not believe the story; and not a few who know it."⁵ In fact, Rothman goes further than Callender, asserting that "some people in Virginia" had known either of the relationship or of the story about the relationship as early as 1790, when Jefferson and his domestic entourage returned from his tour of duty as Minister to France.⁶ Deploying epistemological criteria associated with "inference to the best explanation," we argue in this chapter that historians ought to remain agnostic as to whether Jefferson's neighbors really did know that Jefferson and Hemings were sexually involved with each other, because the historical record is not sufficient to show that Rothman's accounting for the historical record is clearly the best accounting.⁷

We became less skeptical of Rothman's claims in the wake of reading his 2003 book, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, which includes a chapter on Hemings and Jefferson. The wealth of evidence concerning interracial sex in Virginia that Rothman displays in his book to some extent makes up for his lack of evidence concerning the dissemination of rumors of the Hemings–Jefferson case in particular. But in both the 1999 article and the 2003 chapter Rothman does not merely claim that in pre–Civil War Virginia there was a "social knowledge" of the existence of interracial sex; he also claims that there was "social knowledge about Jefferson and Hemings in Albemarle County and among the Virginia gentry long before anything about the couple appeared in the press" (Rothman 2003, 16; see also 37). On this particular point we had—and continue to have—significant doubts about Rothman's attentiveness to historical epistemology.

INFERENCE TO THE BEST EXPLANATION

Supposing that Thomas and Sally did have a sexual relationship, did their neighbors know about that relationship? We believe that the answer to this question ought to be construed as an attempt to make sense of the historical

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more than merely devise hypotheses for further testing. Peirce explicitly pointed to one such role: the establishing of historical facts. Notably, he wrote that "numberless documents refer to a conqueror called Napoleon Bonaparte. Though we have not seen the man, yet we cannot explain what we have seen, namely, all these documents and monuments, without supposing that he really existed."¹² To gloss this: We cannot conclude by deduction that Napoleon existed (or that World War I began in 1914, to take another example). Nor can we arrive at such facts inductively, since they are not empirically observable. Rather, they can only be established abductively, when we observe certain facts about the present-day world (most obviously, the present-day existence of "numberless documents" referring to Napoleon) and then postulate a cause (namely, a really existing Napoleon) that would explain these facts. In other words, the "best explanation" of the multitude of documents referring to Napoleon and his actions is that Napoleon existed and that he actually engaged in these actions.

The computer scientist John R. Josephson relates the truth-establishing species of abduction to inference to the best explanation. He schematizes inference to the best explanation in the following way: "D is a collection of data (facts, observations, givens). H explains D (would, if true, explain D). No other hypothesis can explain D as well as H does. Therefore, H is probably true."¹³ Of course, H might imply other statements that we know to be false, in which case H would be a bad hypothesis. But we need not reject out of hand a hypothesis that contradicts previously held beliefs—rather, we might reject those other beliefs. The rejection of established beliefs because of the greater persuasiveness of a new hypothesis is a regular occurrence in human life and human history. Galileo's rejection of the earth-centered view of the universe in favor of the "new" heliocentric hypothesis proposed by Copernicus is an example of a case where a new hypothesis is so much better than the old that it is adopted even at the cost of rejecting a deeply established set of beliefs.

In cases where otherwise tenable hypotheses are at some point in contradiction with each other, we need not wholly reject either hypothesis. It is possible (and quite common among intelligent people) to subscribe tentatively to two or more inconsistent hypotheses while at the same time acknowledging their inconsistency. We believe that such cases of inconsistency are fairly common in historiography. We are inclined to suggest that historians ought to remain agnostic about which of two otherwise tenable hypotheses is in error until further research and argument have settled the issue—if in fact they settle the issue.

In applying the logic of "inference to the best explanation" to historical inquiry, we need to be attentive to the different senses of the term *explain*. In a broad and also rather vague sense, to "explain" a set of data is to show how it "makes sense." In this sense, *explain* is more or less synonymous with *elucidate* or *clarify* (a sense of *explain* that was noted, but put to one side, in chapter 4, note 9). Since elucidation or clarification is an elucidation or clarification *for us*, this sense of *explain* is also akin to *interpretation* as defined in chapter 4, where an interpretation is an answer to the question "What is the significance of X, for us, now?" However, to "explain" a historical event or existent in a more specialized sense, the historian needs to do more than offer a hypothesis that makes sense of the presently existing body of evidence; she needs to offer a hypothesis as to what caused this body of evidence to come into being, which usually means that she needs to say what caused the past state of affairs.¹⁴

The meaning of *explanation* in the phrase "inference to the best explanation" should be understood as akin to but not identical with the meaning given to the term in chapter 4, where an explanation is an answer to the question "What caused X?" Note also that chapter 4 distinguishes between explanation, on the one hand, and argument or justification on the other. This distinction allows historians and their readers to differentiate between *offering an explanation* and *claiming that the explanation is true*. In this chapter, too, we focus on *explanation* in the sense of a proposal as to what caused a particular event or existent. However, in the slightly shifted perspective of this chapter the *explanandum* (the thing to be explained) is as often as not *the evidence itself*.¹⁵

In abductive inference we offer a *possibly true* account of one or another reality (whether, to take a traditional perspective, this is a supposed reality in the past, or whether it is a body of evidence existing in the present). Going one step further, in attempting infer to the *best* explanation, we offer a justification or justifications for believing that one "explanation" (or description, or interpretation) is better than its competitors. Admittedly, "inference to the best explanation" is a weaker form of justification than are deduction and sense-certainty. Moreover, it is difficult to establish fixed guidelines for deciding when one "explanation" is better than another. The theory of inference to the best explanation is not a magic formula, a skeleton key that will open all doors. All the same, we believe that the theory has much to offer the historian. It provides a way of understanding processes of reasoning that are central to the practice of historical research and that good historians already employ in an intuitive fashion. The "best explanation" is the best

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account as to what caused something in the past. Alternatively, the “best explanation” offers the best answer to the question “What caused the totality of the evidence to be as it is?”

THAGARD'S THREE CRITERIA

The philosopher of science Paul Thagard has proposed three criteria for deciding which explanation, or which *kind* of explanation, is best in any given case: consilience (the more data explained by an explanation, the better); simplicity (the fewer “auxiliary” hypotheses necessary to make the explanation work, the better); and analogicality (the more analogous an explanation is to other explanations we know to be true, the better).¹⁶ The last criterion—analogicality—is somewhat weaker than the others, and should be used very carefully in historical research and writing. For instance: one might *suppose* that Jefferson ate cornbread for breakfast on the basis of the known fact that many of his contemporaries ate cornbread for breakfast, but such a supposition can only offer a rather low degree of certainty. Any reasonably persuasive evidence to the contrary would blow this supposition to pieces, and a good historian will remain largely agnostic about claims for which analogicality is the only support.

The criterion of consilience is useful when one wants to compare an account that explains data A, B, and C to another that explains data A, B, C, and D (the second theory, all other things being equal, would be better). However, consilience fails as a criterion when two competing accounts make sense of different ranges of data. For example, if we hypothesize that Jefferson fathered Hemings's son Eston, this explains Eston Hemings's descendants carrying the Jefferson Y chromosome, whereas if we hypothesize that it was one of Jefferson's nephews who fathered Eston Hemings, this explains the testimony of Edmund Bacon and T. J. Randolph (Jefferson's overseer and grandson, respectively), both of whom denied that a sexual relationship existed between Jefferson and Hemings. (Conversely, the first hypothesis fails to explain Bacon's and Randolph's testimony, and the second fails to explain the DNA evidence.) Comparing competing explanations is a matter of deciding which evidence matters more, and this decision cannot be based on a quantitative comparison alone.

The criterion of simplicity favors explanations that need fewer auxiliary hypotheses to fit explanations to the circumstances. Auxiliary hypotheses are required whenever we posit past events or objects without evidential support, solely in order to make our theory work. The simplest explanations usually do not require any auxiliary hypotheses. For example, Madi-

son Hemings stated in his 1873 memoir (referred to in note 4, above) that he had an older sister named Harriet. The best explanation of this action (namely, Madison's stating of this claim) is that Madison Hemings *believed* that he had an older sister named Harriet, and that it was this that caused him to make this statement.¹⁷ Our knowledge of Madison Hemings's circumstances justifies assigning him this belief: according to Jefferson's Farm Book and other sources, Sally Hemings gave birth to a daughter named Harriet in 1801.¹⁸ In this simple example, Madison Hemings's action and his circumstances both point to the same state of mind. Therefore, no auxiliary hypotheses are needed to explain this piece of evidence.

Madison Hemings's memoir also describes Thomas Jefferson as having “little taste or care for agricultural pursuits,” and yet we know from other sources that Jefferson took great interest in farming. Therefore, a historian interested in establishing the reliability of Madison Hemings's memoir must introduce auxiliary hypotheses—that is, hypotheses that we have no independent basis for taking to be true—in order to make Madison Hemings's beliefs about Jefferson fit in with what we know to have been true of Jefferson. Gordon-Reed suggests that Madison Hemings may have been referring to Thomas Jefferson in the years when he (Hemings) “came of age” at Monticello. In 1819, Madison was fourteen, just apprenticed to his uncle John, and therefore “would have been old enough to pay serious attention.” At that time Jefferson was “obsessed, not with his farm, but with building his university” (22). Gordon-Reed has no textual basis for assuming that Hemings was referring only to his formative years; she makes this assumption only to remove the contradiction between, on the one hand, her description of Madison Hemings's memoir as containing statements that Madison believed to be true and, on the other, our knowledge of what was actually true. Here Gordon-Reed employs an auxiliary hypothesis. She posits a historical existent (Madison's state of mind) that cannot be verified on the basis of the available historical record. If there were another explanation of Madison Hemings's statement that accounted for the same data without appeal to an auxiliary hypothesis, this second explanation would have to be preferred, all other things being equal. In the absence of such an explanation, Gordon-Reed's account, while far less than certainly true, may be entertained as the best available explanation.

Thagard's third criterion for judging the quality of an explanation, analogicality, is weak but sometimes useful. For example, in arguing for the existence of a sexual relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, we might be tempted to draw an analogy between Jefferson and the hundreds of his white contemporaries who had sexual relations with

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analogicality

female slaves. But while such an analogy might help us to *interpret* the alleged Hemings-Jefferson relationship—that is, to see it as making sense within the larger context of pre-Civil War Virginia—which would then also make the existence of the alleged relationship more plausible than would otherwise be the case, it cannot *explain* the relationship, in the sense of saying what caused it. Nor, indeed, can it establish, beyond the level of mere supposition, that such a relationship existed in the first place. For remember that we are concerned here with the behavior of a *specific* historical actor (or, at most, of two historical actors). Accordingly, unless we argue that Jefferson altered his actions in order to make them congruent with the actions of the many white Virginia slave-owners who had sex with slaves, we cannot make use of the analogy in explaining Jefferson's actions (assuming, for the sake of the argument, that he actually did have a sexual relationship with Sally Hemings). An overlap between the categories of "white men who owned slaves" and "white men who had sex with slaves" does not, in and of itself, establish a causal relationship, any more than would an overlap between "white men whose surnames began with J" and "white men who spoke French." Thus, analogicality is far from a foolproof way of establishing the best explanation of the historical record. All the same, it appears to have some usefulness for historical thinking, although inferences based solely on analogicality clearly are evidentially weak.

A FOURTH CRITERION

To the useful criteria of consilience and simplicity and the more problematic criterion of analogicality, we add a fourth. Since we human beings are much better at establishing causes than we are at predicting the future—especially where the motivations of other human beings are concerned—we ought to expect history to be firmly rooted in seeking out the causes of known events rather than deducing the consequences of some set of events *in abstracto*. Imagine someone attempting to deduce what would happen in 1938 solely on the basis of her knowledge of the events and existents of 1937 and earlier. Given the contingency of human history, it would be highly surprising if such a person were to succeed in any significant way. On the other hand, a historian in a position to ask the question "What were the causes of such-and-such an event that actually occurred in 1938?" would be able to exploit the historical record in her search for answers. The historian is doing history, whereas his imagined competitor is engaging in futuristic speculation. (This point is further illustrated in chapter 7's discussion of "virtual history.")

As our treatment of auxiliary hypotheses has shown, there is nothing wrong with positing the existence of a historical particular of which one cannot be completely certain—a particular that is not well supported by evidence. In our opinion, of course, a historian is obliged to indicate where he has made a guess. We suggest—in accordance with our fourth criterion—that where historical particulars are posited without knock-down drag-out evidence, we ought to prefer those guesses that posit *causes* over those that posit *effects*. A historical explanation that starts from a known historical particular (say, the existence of Madison Hemings's memoir) and then seeks out the causes of that particular is in general to be preferred to an explanation that starts from a known historical particular and then deduces the supposed effects of that fact (as in the argument that "Jefferson could not have had sex with Sally Hemings because he was too much of a racist"). As has been shown over and over again, historians' deductions tend to be far less certain than they believe them to be. Thus it seems to us that historians ought in general to *abduce* (posit causes on the basis of effects) rather than *deduce* (posit effects on the basis of causes). We call the first kind of guess an effect-to-cause hypothesis, while the second we call a cause-to-effect hypothesis. The first procedure amounts to proposing explanations, whereas the second is akin to predicting the future. The first procedure is preferable to the second in that it keeps the historian rooted in the real evidence; consciously practiced, it encourages the historian to be clear about which parts of his account are less than certain.

Our fourth criterion, then, is simply this: that in judging historical accounts we ought to remember that explanations in which the reasoning is from effects to causes are preferable to those in which the reasoning is from causes to effects.

Causality in history is an extremely tricky subject. Consider the differences between the following three types of historical realities that might be employed in explaining aspects of the historical record: (1) actions by historical actors; (2) states of mind of historical actors; and (3) historical circumstances. Each of these is highly relevant to the historian's practice of recounting the past. For example, we have before us a letter, putatively written by Jefferson. In inferring that Jefferson was in fact the author of the letter, we might invoke some or all of the following:

1. Action-oriented cause: Jefferson's act of letter-writing caused the letter. At this point we might introduce a handwriting analysis, the letter's provenance, and so on, to establish that it was indeed the product of his act of letter-writing and not of some other act, such as that of a forger.

2. State-of-mind cause: Jefferson's beliefs and desires caused the letter. To establish that the letter was indeed the product of Jefferson's state of mind and of no one else's, we might argue that the letter contains information that only Jefferson could have known, or arguments that only Jefferson was putting forward at the time.¹⁹
3. Circumstance-oriented cause: The historical circumstances caused Jefferson's state of mind (which in turn caused him to write the letter). Here we might connect a poor harvest on Monticello to the letter's request for an extension of credit.²⁰

A rough-and-ready way to think of the possible impact of these three types of historical realities is to regard actions as explaining *what* happened, states of mind as explaining *why* it happened (taking "why" in this instance to be a question as to purposes or intentions), and the evocation of historical circumstances as helping to explain why we believe that such-and-such explanations in terms of actions or states of mind are true. Insofar as the historian decides to treat a historical person as an *agent* or *actor* on the historical scene (that is, as a "character," in the sense that this term has in chapter 4), rather than as a resultant of one or more determinisms, she is obliged to describe what the person's purposes were in acting, and to do so by invoking his or her beliefs and desires at the time of the action as an explanation of the action in question. Although this chapter is concerned with the epistemology involved in *describing* what was the case (Did Jefferson and Hemings have a sexual relationship? Did their neighbors know?), establishing the truth of these descriptions depends in part on the associated explanations as to why the historical actors in question acted as they did.

We believe that this point can be expanded into a rule of thumb: a particular description of the past will be better justified to the degree that the description also offers an explanation of the states of mind of the historical actors involved. For example, Edmund Bacon stated that on Jefferson's orders he gave Harriet Hemings (Sally's youngest daughter) \$50 and helped her run away from Monticello (Gordon-Reed, 27). If we assume that Bacon was telling the truth, then we might explain Jefferson's orders by inferring that Jefferson had some attachment to Harriet or some commitment to her mother, and knew that Harriet wanted to leave Monticello. This would be an explanation that reasons from effect (Jefferson's orders) to most likely cause (Jefferson's beliefs and desires). A cause-to-effect explanation, on the other hand, would posit Jefferson's state of mind, both on the basis of his other actions (e.g., his strikingly racist assertions in *Notes on the State of Virginia*

[referred to in note 4, above] and his demonstrated reluctance to free slaves, especially females) and on the basis of his circumstances (e.g., his mounting financial hardships), and would then argue that Bacon's testimony must be wrong, because Jefferson would never have done such a thing. This is reasoning from *putative cause* (posited beliefs and desires, plus circumstances) to *unobserved effect* (according to which Jefferson gave no orders, and Bacon, for some unknown reason, lied). Cause-to-effect explanations are weaker than effect-to-cause explanations for the same reasons that our predictions of another's actions are less accurate than our understanding of her intentions afterward. It can be extremely difficult to know what a particular human being is thinking, feeling, and wanting at any given moment. In many cases, we cannot predict the actions of our best friend, much less the actions of a long-dead historical figure.

Our fourth criterion applies in the following way to what we have called state-of-mind causes: explanations that posit beliefs and desires that, on the basis of recorded actions, could credibly have been held by the historical actors in question are generally better than explanations that predict unrecorded actions on the basis of posited beliefs and desires. It is useful to name these two contrasting types of explanation (which will become clearer to the reader when we apply them to the Jefferson-Hemings case) "bottom-up" and "top-down." Our claim is that, all other things being equal, bottom-up explanations (which reason from known effect to inferred cause) generally beat top-down explanations (which reason from a putatively known cause to a postulated effect). Since we are much better at understanding other people's past actions than at predicting their future actions, a good historical explanation will tend to build up from the data—that is, it will construct credibly attributable beliefs and desires as a basis for explaining recorded actions, rather than positing unrecorded actions that supposedly followed from a historical actor's postulated beliefs and desires. In other words, it is better for explanations of historical actors' behaviors and states of mind to be bottom-up (starting with what we plausibly *know* to have been the case and seeking out the prior causes) than top-down (moving from a general assertion to an inferred posterior result).²¹

INFERRING THE RELATIONSHIP

In *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*, Annette Gordon-Reed exhaustively lays out the evidence concerning Madison Hemings, James Callender, T. J. Randolph (who claimed that Jefferson's

nephew Peter Carr was the father of Sally Hemings's children [254–56]), and finally Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings themselves. Although Gordon-Reed says nothing in her book about inference to the best explanation, it is in fact an extended argument of precisely this type. On the basis of the available evidence she posits beliefs and desires for each relevant figure, and then she suggests that an account of what happened that assumes a Jefferson–Hemings relationship is evidentially stronger than a competing account that assumes a relationship between Hemings and either Peter Carr or his brother Samuel Carr. (Again, bear in mind that Gordon-Reed reached this conclusion before the appearance of the DNA evidence, which demonstrated to an extremely high degree of certainty that neither of the Carr brothers could have fathered Eston Hemings, since they were not in the Jefferson male line.)

Gordon-Reed showed that the Jefferson–Hemings explanation is more consistent (that is, explains more data) than does the Carr–Hemings explanation. The Jefferson–Hemings explanation accounts for such things as Jefferson's favorable treatment (and ultimately his freeing) of Hemings's children; reports as to the resemblance of Sally Hemings's children to Jefferson; Madison Hemings's claim to be the son of Thomas Jefferson; and the fact that Hemings's conceptions all occurred at times when Jefferson was present at Monticello.²²

Gordon-Reed also argued persuasively that the Jefferson–Hemings explanation is simpler (that is, makes less use of unsupported auxiliary hypotheses) than is the Carr–Hemings explanation. The Carr–Hemings explanation has to assume that Madison Hemings and Israel Jefferson (Thomas Jefferson's manservant, no family relation) lied when they spoke of the Jefferson–Hemings relationship to S.F. Wetmore, the abolitionist publisher who interviewed them in 1873, or that they allowed him to put words into their mouths. The Jefferson–Hemings explanation, on the other hand, must assume that Edmund Bacon and T. J. Randolph spoke inaccurately when they denied the Jefferson–Hemings relationship. Gordon-Reed showed that this second hypothesis is more supportable than the first, for she was able to question the accuracy of Bacon's knowledge (he arrived at Monticello five years after the events he denied) and to impeach Randolph's reliability (he gave two different accounts of how he came to know that the Carrs were involved). She also noted that both men had a perfectly understandable interest in preserving Jefferson's reputation, while neither Israel Jefferson nor Madison Hemings had much to gain by fabricating their story.

Finally, in an extensive discussion Gordon-Reed exposed the weakness of the top-down explanation that Jefferson's character rendered him incapable of a relationship with Hemings (107–57, 228–34). Agreeing with Gordon-Reed, we are inclined to reduce the problems with the “character” argument to two. First, those who deploy the character argument are appealing to something that is completely unobservable, namely, a posited “inner Jefferson,” to which they attribute such-and-such characteristics on what can only amount to highly subjective grounds (hence grounds that are likely to be infected, wittingly or not, by the historian's own unstated and undefended ideological preferences). Second, these persons are also assuming that the said character structure would have made it impossible for Jefferson to engage in such-and-such actions—in this case, to have sex with a slave. In assuming that Jefferson's actions would have had to be consistent, they ignore (or at least discount) the high degree of observable inconsistency in the actions of human beings.

In *An American Controversy* Gordon-Reed did not purport to establish that Thomas Jefferson had a sexual relationship with Sally Hemings. Rather, her claim was that “the quantum of evidence that exists to support the notion [that Jefferson and Hemings did have sex] has been seriously underestimated.” She also concluded that the evidence for what was then the dominant alternative theory, namely, that the Carr brothers were responsible, “has been overestimated.” (210) In the terminology of inference to the best explanation, Gordon-Reed found that the Jefferson–Hemings explanation was not sufficiently better than the competition to justify accepting it as true unreservedly. She succeeded in demonstrating, however, that the Carr–Hemings explanation was clearly *not* the best.

INFERRING KNOWLEDGE OF THE RELATIONSHIP IN ALBEMARLE COUNTY

We now apply the epistemological criteria associated with inference to the best explanation to Joshua Rothman's claim that the accuracy of James Callender's allegations concerning the Jefferson household are “remarkable testimony to the extent and transmission of social knowledge about private interracial sexual affairs in Virginia communities” (Rothman 1999, 103; Rothman 2003, 16 [see note 6, above]). More particularly, Rothman claims that Callender's reports testify to the broad circulation in Albemarle County of knowledge concerning the alleged Jefferson–Hemings relationship. Rothman's claim, if true, would make sense of two types of historical data: reports of, and apparent evidence for, pre-1802 rumors about a

Jefferson–Hemings relationship, and the mix of fact and fiction in what Callender says about the alleged relationship. Rothman explains these data by reference to the beliefs and desires of James Callender and of (unnamed) residents of Albemarle County. His account involves four hypotheses:

H1. Before September 1802, many Albemarle County residents believed that Jefferson was involved in a sexual relationship with an enslaved woman, Sally Hemings, and had had children by her (Rothman 1999, 95).

H2. These residents also believed details about the relationship that we now know to be false, such as the existence of a young black “President Tom” (purportedly the eldest child of Jefferson and Hemings, purportedly born about 1790) (Rothman 1999, 102).²³

H3. Callender thought that the beliefs described in H1 and H2 were true.

H4. Callender desired to report the truth, and desired not to report falsehoods (Rothman 1999, 89 [see also 100–101]; Rothman 2003, 16).²⁴

If we are to consider Rothman’s account of the situation plausible, we must be able to think of the above-noted beliefs and desires as caused by what we know to have been true about the historical circumstances. Rothman mentions such data (or alleged data) as the following: the proved existence of a Jefferson–Hemings relationship (Rothman 1999, 89); the public actions (that is, statements) of Jefferson related to miscegenation; circumstances at Monticello related to miscegenation; and common feelings about interracial sex among white residents of Albemarle County.

In the following sections we engage in our own examination of the data. We believe that the data support an account of what people believed or said about the alleged Jefferson–Hemings relationship prior to 1802 that is different from Rothman’s account. Here are the central elements of our alternative account (AA):

AA1. Before September 1802, almost no residents of Albemarle County had any reason to believe that Jefferson had fathered any of Hemings’s children or had any special relationship with her. Indeed, few would have known who Hemings was.²⁵

AA2. Residents of Albemarle County knew that Jefferson was circumstantially associated with miscegenation, and therefore may have been willing to believe (suspect?) that he was involved with an enslaved woman.²⁶

AA3. Callender thought that he had reason to believe that Jefferson was the father of Hemings’s children.

AA4. Aware of AA2, Callender desired to persuade his readers that Jefferson *was* the father of Hemings’s children.

AA5. Callender believed that in order to persuade his readers of a Jefferson–Hemings relationship, he needed to make some statements he knew to be false. Specifically, he needed to convert AA2 to the stronger H1 and to fabricate H2.

Our alternative account does not explain how or why Callender thought he had reason to believe that there was a Jefferson–Hemings relationship. He may have had inside information—or, he may merely have *guessed correctly* on the basis of whatever circumstantial information he could gather. Either way, Callender might have thought he had reason to suspect a relationship even if very few people in Albemarle county did.

DIRECT REPORTS OF AND EVIDENCE FOR THE RUMOR

Rothman has five pieces of evidence that directly support his hypothesis H1, namely, that it was widely believed among Jefferson’s neighbors prior to Callender’s first published accusation in the *Richmond Recorder* of 1 September 1802 that there was a sexual relationship between Jefferson and “this wench Sally.” First, Callender himself accompanied his allegation with an assertion that there was “not an individual in the neighborhood of Charlottesville that does not believe the story, and not a few who know it” (Rothman 1999, 87). In the *Recorder* of October 20, 1802, Callender referred to an unnamed “gentleman” who came into the Richmond district court and offered to bet anyone a suit of new clothes that the story was true.²⁷ In November he added (false) information about Hemings’s children, which he tempered with the phrase, “it is said, although we do not give it as gospel” (Rothman 2003, 35, 254, n. 62). Finally, in December he claimed to be able to prove his claims in court with “a dozen witnesses” (Rothman 1999, 99, 111, n. 39; Rothman 2003, 34, 254, n. 59). However, reports postdating September 1, 1802, are highly suspect in this context, because rumors of a Jefferson–Hemings relationship certainly would have existed after Callender’s first accusations were published.

A second piece of evidence that Rothman cites for believing that the relationship was bruited about before September 1802 is the existence of a piece of doggerel that appeared in *Port Folio*, a Federalist newspaper published in Philadelphia in July 1802. The imagined black poet proposes switching wives with Jefferson, so that Jefferson would have a “black wife” and the black poet a white wife. But nothing in the doggerel suggests that Jefferson was *already sleeping* with a “black wife.”²⁸

Third, William Rind, editor of the *Virginia Federalist*, apparently alluded to Jefferson's "depravity" in June 1800. (We have not seen this reference, and Rothman cites it from Callender's September 1, 1802, article rather than directly [Rothman 1999, 94, 110, n. 22; Rothman 2003, 30, 252, n. 42]; thus we have not investigated the context in which this assertion was made — nor, apparently, has Rothman.)

Fourth, after Callender's first piece appeared, the *Gazette of the United States* allegedly stated that while it did not have the corroboration to publish its own story about Jefferson, it had "heard the same subject freely spoken of in Virginia, and by Virginia Gentlemen" (Rothman 1999, 95, 110, n. 24; Rothman 2003, 30, 253, n. 45).²⁹

Finally, Henry Randall, an early biographer of Jefferson, wrote in private correspondence in 1856 that Callender was "helped by some of Jefferson's neighbors" (Rothman 1999, 99, 111, n. 40; Rothman 2003, 34, 254, n. 60).

Callender's testimony is suspect because it appears that he would have had a clear motive to inflate a small number of sources into a scandalous rumor in order to bolster his claims (this is our AA4 and AA5). As Rothman notes, Callender was "an angry, bitter, and cynical man who made a career by specializing in invective and character assassination" (Rothman 1999, 88; Rothman 2003, 14). It is true, as Rothman notes, that sometimes Callender may have been concerned that his statements actually be true. After all, some of his statements we know to be true (e.g., that there was a slave named Sally at Monticello; and it is also reasonable to suppose that she had had five children by the time Callender wrote). Further, on one occasion, when he thought that new information might be false, Callender stated that he did not "give it as gospel." Callender's biographer, Michael Durey, and Gordon-Reed both assert that Callender had a good record (for his time) in reporting the basic truth of matters (this is further justification for Rothman's H4, namely, that Callender desired to report the truth and to not report falsehoods).³⁰

But did Callender view the alleged common knowledge as another fact to be reported, or did he fabricate it as a tool to heighten the scandal and convince his readers? After all, he fabricated insulting (and inaccurate) descriptions of Sally Hemings, perhaps in order to arouse the stereotypes of his day,³¹ and for all we know he may have invented Hemings's twelve-year-old son, "President Tom," for whose existence there is absolutely no evidence. When did Callender consider himself to be reporting fact, and when was he allowing himself to exaggerate in order to rile up his readers? Evidence of pre-September 1802 rumors concerning Jefferson's sexual activities is very thin. Some instances of rumor-spreading are reported only

by Callender, and thus are without confirmation. The *Port Folio* doggerel is quite inconclusive as evidence of rumors of Jeffersonian miscegenation. The verses caricature a black slave who wants to "make all like" and "nab" his master's white wife (Jefferson's wife had died in 1782). Could the poem have been meant as a mockery of the enslaved population? Or as a northern gibe at southern miscegenation? Both seem as likely as the suggestion that the piece is a joke aimed specifically at Jefferson and alluding to his sexual relationship with a slave. What satirist, with real information about a sitting president, would mention him only as an afterthought to musings on a slave's desires?³² In addition, Randall's testimony in 1856 is highly suspect for several reasons. First, it is of late date. Second, his claims are unclear. Did he mean that the neighbors helped Callender discover the story, or did they help by fueling speculation and rumor? Third, Randall said that one of the Carr nephews was the father of Hemings's children (Gordon-Reed, 80, 82). Accordingly, any allegations that Jefferson's neighbors might have made to Callender to the effect that Jefferson had fathered children by Hemings would have contradicted the story that Randall told in 1856. If Randall believed his own story, then *he* could not have held that Jefferson's neighbors knew that Jefferson had fathered children by Hemings (since one cannot *know* something that is false, but can only *mistakenly believe* it).

Overall, we find that the best evidence for the pre-September 1, 1802, spread of rumors about Jefferson's alleged sexual activities are the lines in the *Washington Federalist* of September 14, 1801 (see our note 29, above), stating that "a man very high in office" had fathered "a number of yellow children" and was "addicted to golden affections." (Rothman introduces this evidence in his 2003 chapter; he did not discuss it in his 1999 article.) The anonymous author appears to be doing obeisance to the widely held ethical taboo against spreading defamatory gossip, given that he tempers his mention of the allegations by declaring that "if they are false and malicious they ought to be contradicted."

THE QUALITY OF CALLENDER'S REPORTS

Rothman argues that common knowledge of the (alleged) Jefferson-Hemings relationship best explains the mix of fact and fiction in Callender's reports (H1 and H2). After all, *someone* must have told Callender a lot: Hemings's name, her status as a house servant, her trip with Jefferson to France, her (alleged) first pregnancy, and the five children she had borne by 1802. But Callender also seems to have made mistakes, particularly with regard to his fictitious "President Tom," the purportedly twelve-year-old son of Hemings who, Callender claimed, looked like Jefferson and lived at

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Monticello. To Rothman, Callender's mix of fact and fiction is proof that he was tapping into a gossip mill in which "the possibilities for exaggeration to become hyperbole as the Jefferson-Hemings story passed from person to person . . . were enormous" (Rothman 1999, 103; see also Rothman 2003, 37). But this explanation seems questionable. One person could have been as wrong as twenty. Or Callender might have added his *own* hyperbole.

Rothman notes another statement by Callender: in December 1802 the journalist offered to prove his allegations in court with "a dozen witnesses." Rothman, seeking to locate the rumor among the Albemarle gentry, seizes on the bluster: "if [Callender] was serious . . . his witnesses would have to have been white"—because Callender's "disgust for African-Americans" (Rothman 1999, 99; Rothman 2003, 34) would have disinclined him to speak to slaves (also, slaves were not permitted to testify in court). But the only contemporaries of Jefferson and Hemings who we can say *unquestionably* knew (or believed they knew, or purported to know) of the relationship were Monticello slaves: Madison Hemings and Israel Jefferson (and Israel, although Jefferson's personal servant for fourteen years, stated that he did not "positively know" about the relationship, but believed it only "from circumstances").

How would white people have learned the details of the alleged relationship? Rothman speculates that "given Callender's disgust for African-Americans, it is unlikely that he spoke directly to any Albemarle slaves." A similar argument was applied for years to Jefferson: Dumas Malone, Virginius Dabney, and John Miller ruled out Jefferson's having had a sexual relationship with Hemings in part on grounds of his racism (Gordon-Reed, 133–34). Such top-down explanations are much too weak to prove either that Jefferson would not have had sex with Hemings or that Callender would not have spoken with slaves. If we permit ourselves to imagine that Callender spoke with slaves, then we no longer have to assume common knowledge among Jefferson's white neighbors in order to explain Callender's reports. After all, the only white "witnesses" known to have commented on the matter (Edmund Bacon and T. J. Randolph, noted above; and one other person, Jefferson's granddaughter Ellen Coolidge) all stated that someone else was the father of Hemings's children (Gordon-Reed, 28, 79). We have no proof that these "witnesses" knew the actual truth. There is much reason to believe that Jefferson and Hemings would have been very, very discreet about their alleged relationship. (Note that Israel Jefferson, in the 1873 memoir published by S. F. Wetmore, is said to have said that he "believe[d] from circumstances" that the Hemings children had been fathered by Jefferson, but that he "d[id] not positively know" it ["Appendix C," in Gordon-Reed,

253].) Perhaps the "witnesses" who denied that Jefferson had fathered Sally Hemings's children really did honestly believe that someone else was the father. It is even possible to imagine that Hemings had a relationship with one or both of the Carrs as well as with Jefferson. We do not *know* one way or the other.

The claim that Callender "probably relied especially on members of the Virginia gentry from Albemarle and counties nearby" for his information (Rothman 1999, 99; Rothman 2003, 34) lacks support from anything Callender said, for Callender did not mention the social status of his sources (although the alleged *Gazette* citation does mention the rumor among "Virginia Gentlemen"). Rothman guesses: "These men . . . might have overheard their slaves discussing the Hemings story" (Rothman 1999, 99; Rothman 2003, 34). And Rothman notes that they "would have been the whites most likely to have visited Jefferson at Monticello . . . (and to have seen Sally Hemings and perhaps her children)" (Rothman 1999, 99; Rothman 2003, 34). But Hemings's oldest child to survive early infancy, Beverly, was just four years old in 1802, and Hemings herself was probably employed as Jefferson's private chambermaid and perhaps as a seamstress. No good reason exists for us to imagine that she or her young children would stand out to white visitors, especially at Monticello, which was home to a large number of light-skinned house slaves (Rothman 1999, 87–88). Even if they had been noticed, it does not seem credible to imagine that they or Jefferson would have given to white visitors any indication of their relationship, especially when we remember that Jefferson's own manservant believed in the relationship only "from circumstances." Nor does it seem likely that any of the white people closest to Jefferson and Hemings would have given away their alleged secret, even assuming (which we have no textual basis for doing) that they possessed the knowledge to do so.

CIRCUMSTANCES AT MONTICELLO: AN UNJUSTIFIED EQUATING OF RUMOR WITH KNOWLEDGE

Rothman, having exhausted the textual evidence, and having attempted to explain the quality of Callender's reports by reference to the quality of the alleged common knowledge among white residents of Albemarle, has a further argument, namely, that the Jefferson-Hemings relationship was common knowledge because circumstances made it easy to believe. In Rothman's words, "Jefferson's particular actions and associations also gave residents of Albemarle County reason to believe the Hemings story" (Rothman 1999, 103; Rothman 2003, 38). Rothman cites the following circumstantial matters: the longstanding presence of "white slaves" at Monticello; Jeffer-

son's father-in-law's long relationship with Betty Hemings, Sally's mother; Jefferson's nephew Samuel Carr's reputed miscegenation (which seems to have been first written about in 1874); and Jefferson's sale, in 1792, of Sally Hemings's sibling Mary Hemings to her white lover, Colonel Thomas Bell (the result of a request by Mary Hemings that Jefferson accommodated).

All these circumstances lead Rothman to conclude that "many people who lived in Jefferson's neighborhood believed the Hemings story because Virginia's slaveholders and Jefferson himself had prepared them to believe it" (Rothman 1999, 104; Rothman 2003, 38). At this point Rothman is no longer arguing bottom-up (from observed effect to hypothesized cause), but top-down (from invisible cause to hypothesized effect). In the absence of any recorded actions by Albemarle residents that are both (a) independent of Callender and (b) best explained by hypothesis H1, namely, that the relationship was common knowledge, Rothman is arguing that the residents' *environment* caused H1: "Given what Virginians already knew about sex and slavery in their society in general, *they did not need to have heard the details* of Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings to believe he might be sexually involved with her" (Rothman 1999, 103 [emphasis added]; Rothman 2003, 37–38 has a slightly different wording).

Here Rothman is in tricky territory. As Edmund Gettier showed in a famous article ("Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"), a justified true belief is not *necessarily* knowledge. On the contrary, it is knowledge attributable to the person making the assertion in question if and only if, in making the assertion, that person has knowledge of the assertion's actual justification.³¹ What if a white resident of Albemarle County, steeped in Virginia's culture of miscegenation, noticed Monticello's light-skinned slaves, winked at his neighbor and said: "I bet there are some young mulatto President Toms running around up there." Such a belief is not *knowledge* of the Jefferson–Hemings relationship (H1), because the belief could have occurred with or without Sally Hemings. This is what we are suggesting in AA2, above.

In his account Rothman invokes the anthropologist's notion of "social knowledge." What constitutes *social* knowledge? We take it that social knowledge is knowledge of the customs of a particular society gained from living within that society. For example, even Virginians who had little contact with the workings of the slave system could not help but infer, from the visible existence of many light-skinned slaves, that a lot of "sex across the color line" was going on. But to apply the designation "social knowledge" to the claim that one particular couple—which in this case would have had to have been remarkably discreet—was having sex is a misapplication. We

believe that Rothman has a plausible, although far from evidentially well-founded, case for his claim that rumors of a Hemings–Jefferson relationship circulated in the "neighborhood" that was Albemarle County. But in our view Rothman unjustifiably equates *rumor* and *belief* with *knowledge*. It may well be that some of Jefferson's neighbors had information that would have justified the central rumor in question (namely, that there was a sexual relationship between Hemings and Jefferson). Such information would have converted rumor into knowledge. But Rothman has no evidence at all that Jefferson's neighbors had such information. Moreover, he *knows* that he does not have such evidence, yet fails to recognize the implications for his argument.³⁴

A SUMMING UP OF THE DATA

The data to be accounted for can be stated as follows:

- D1. In September 1802 Callender asserted that there was a sexual relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings and that it was "well known" that this was so.
- D2. The "black wife" poem appeared in the *Port Folio* and the lines about "Mr. J." in the September 14, 1801, *Washington Federalist*.
- D3. Henry Randall stated in 1856 that Callender was helped by "some of Jefferson's neighbors."
- D4. Callender made correct statements about Sally Hemings.
- D5. Callender made some false and exaggerated statements about Sally Hemings.
- D6. On occasion, Callender was careful to report the "basic truth."
- D7. There is no record of any white contemporary of Callender and Jefferson claiming to know of the alleged Jefferson–Hemings relationship prior to 1802 (with the possible exception of the September 14, 1801, *Washington Federalist* lines). Several reported (long afterward) that they did not believe such a relationship existed.

We note the following circumstantial data that may help explain some of the preceding data:

- D8. Jefferson was publicly associated with miscegenation: light-skinned slaves lived at Monticello; Jefferson's father-in-law apparently had a sexual relationship with a black woman, Betty Hemings; one of Jefferson's nephews may have had sexual relations with black women; and Jefferson sold one of his slaves to her white lover.

D9, Jefferson and Hemings were discreet (inferred from Israel Jefferson's statement and from D7).

D10. The ethical norms of white Albemarle society prohibited open discussion of miscegenation.

THE CASE FOR OUR ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT

Recall Callender's language in his first accusation: "There is not an individual in the neighborhood of Charlottesville who does not believe the story and not a few who know it." Callender draws a distinction between knowledge and belief. Why? What did he mean to imply about those Albemarle residents who merely "believed" in the relationship without "knowing" it? Did any of Jefferson's Albemarle County neighbors in fact *know* anything at all, or were they simply ready to believe whatever rumors might come their way?

After all, aside from Callender's assertions (D1) we have no textual evidence that supports Rothman's claim (H1) that the Jefferson–Hemings relationship was common knowledge. The *Port Folio* poem, the assertions by Rind and the *Gazette*, Henry Randall's recollections, and even the lines in the *Washington Federalist* can all be explained just as well by assuming a common mental association between Jefferson and miscegenation (AA2, above). Further, the circumstantial data (D8), when expanded to include the demonstrated secrecy of the relationship (D9), would surely at most have caused *speculation* that Jefferson was involved with an enslaved woman, not common *knowledge* (H1) that he was so involved.

Further, Rothman's claim that Callender desired to report the truth (H4) does not explain Callender's demonstrated willingness, indeed eagerness, on other occasions to use exaggeration and invention to achieve his goals (D5). If we imagine Callender as willing to use false statements as a means of convincing others of the truth (AA5), this would explain both D1 and D5.

Our alternative account would also explain why no details of the alleged relationship, assuming that there actually was a relationship, were reported, anywhere, before 1802 (D7): the details simply were not known to anyone besides, perhaps, a few people at Monticello (AA1 and AA2). This is a simple bottom-up explanation: lack of action (D7) caused by lack of knowledge (AA1). Rothman must explain D7 (namely, the lack of [any record of] any white contemporary of Callender and Jefferson claiming to *know* of the alleged Jefferson–Hemings relationship prior to 1802) from the top down: that is, he assumes that the ethical norms of Albemarle society (D10) caused people to desire not to discuss their knowledge of the relationship openly.

Both our account and Rothman's account employ auxiliary hypotheses in order to explain how knowledge of the presumed Jefferson–Hemings relationship spread from Monticello. Rothman assumes (without evidence) that knowledge spread from Monticello slaves to the enslaved population of Albemarle, and from the enslaved population to the white gentry (H1), and that somewhere along the line it became corrupted (H2). We assume (also without evidence) that James Callender, desiring to cause Jefferson political harm, investigated a publicly known association between Jefferson and miscegenation (AA2) and in doing so somehow got wind of allegations that were unflattering to Jefferson, as well as of a few pieces of *true* information, most notably the first name of Sally Hemings.³⁵ He then reported AA2 as H1 (namely, that many Albemarle County residents believed that Jefferson was involved in a sexual relationship with an enslaved woman) in order to convince his readers that his account of the relationship was true (AA5).

How does our auxiliary hypothesis compare to Rothman's? We assume that Callender somehow managed to learn certain (true) details about Jefferson's domestic establishment, which he used as the basis for his story about Jefferson and "this wench Sally." We do not claim to know *how* he learned these details. Rothman assumes that the residents of Albemarle County somehow learned and transmitted specific knowledge of a close and salacious secret without leaving any record at all of doing so. Rothman's account provides a simpler explanation of D1; our account better explains D7. What we know of the Albemarle environment (D8 and D9) seems more likely to have caused our AA2 than Rothman's H1. We believe that neither account is clearly better, and that we ought to remain agnostic about which hypothesis (AA2 or H1) offers the truer account of the states of mind of Albemarle residents.

Historians and other readers are of course free to draw their own conclusions—but if they wish to assert them as true, they are obliged to lay out the grounds for believing them to be true. They are also obliged to indicate as clearly as possible where the boundaries (admittedly sometimes variable) are between fact and speculation. Finally, they are obliged to justify—as *speculations*—the speculations that they offer.

Historians are sometimes careless of the distinction between fact and speculation, a carelessness that tends to lead them to present as unequivocally true claims that are not unequivocally true at all. For example, we consider it a mistake, in the light of the current state of the data, to assert as an unequivocal truth that Jefferson had a sexual relationship with Sally Hemings. At the same time, all three of us believe that he in fact did have such a relationship, for we find that the hypothesis that there was such a re-

lationship offers a "better explanation" of the totality of the extant evidence than does the contrary hypothesis. As for the claim that Thomas Jefferson's alleged relationship with Sally Hemings was common knowledge in the neighborhood of Monticello prior to September 1802 (when Callender published the first of his articles on the subject in the *Richmond Recorder*), unless more evidence comes to light, we must regard this not as unequivocal truth but as arrant speculation. We are of course *not* against speculation (since there is a speculative dimension in all history); we are only against speculation that is not identified as such.

We hope that this chapter has helped to show the relevance of inference to the best explanation and of intelligently employed theory generally to the project of reading, writing, and thinking about history. In regular historical works—as distinguished from demonstration pieces in historical epistemology, such as this chapter—the scaffolding of theory is perhaps best kept in the background. But the historical reader and critic should always have the sense that the historian has thought clearly and well about these issues, even if she chooses to offer only hints of the conceptual thinking that has gone into the construction of the historical work in question. When such thinking is absent, we have little reason to have confidence in the truth of the stories that historians tell, however interesting, exciting, edifying, or politically useful those stories may appear to be.