

Writing Early American Lives as Biography

Annette Gordon-Reed

THE genre of biography has long been among the most popular forms of writing. Social creatures that we are, we human beings seem almost endlessly fascinated by one another. For many people, biographies—and their close cousins, autobiographies and memoirs—offer life lessons, sometimes inspirational, sometimes cautionary. And for the historically minded, good biographies, in the manner of all good historical writing, illuminate the times in which the subject lived.

Biographies have been particularly useful in the American context. Whether one measures the American experiment from the founding of Jamestown in 1607 or the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the United States is by the standards of other industrialized nations still quite young. None of its institutions—churches, universities, government, or legal system—approach the life spans of those of its closest counterparts in Europe. And there are no pyramids, no Great Walls or other physical structures, that readily link its current residents, in their eyes and the eyes of the world, to truly ancient times. Institutions are made up of people, and people build structures. Over time, however, both institutions and landmarks may take on lives of their own as symbols, providing a vehicle for telling the country's

Editor's note: The following essay grew out of "Early American Biographies," the seventh in a series of workshops jointly sponsored by the *William and Mary Quarterly* and the University of Southern California-Huntington Early Modern Studies Institute, with support from the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, the Salvatori Forum at USC, and the Mellon Foundation, held at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, on May 25–26, 2012. The workshops are intended to foster intellectual exchange among a group of scholars approaching a general historical question from diverse chronological, geographic, and methodological perspectives. Annette Gordon-Reed acted as the workshop's convener. The participants, most of whom were working on second or subsequent book projects, were Rachel Hope Cleves, Steven W. Hackel, Martha S. Jones, Gregory Nobles, Michael Oberg, Catherine O'Donnell, Joshua Piker, Jenny Hale Pulsipher, James Sidbury, and James H. Sweet. Each supplied a precirculated paper and offered a formal comment on another essay.

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William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., 71, no. 4, October 2014
DOI: 10.5309/willmaryquar.71.4.0491

history while obscuring the stories of the individuals who helped create and maintain them.

There is good reason to say, then, that the history of the United States is most effectively told through the lives of its people. Indeed, throughout the country's first full century, myriad authors tried to do just that. In *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, Scott E. Casper describes this moment:

Groaning presses, overstocked libraries, an impatient public; in nineteenth-century America, biography could be found nearly everywhere a reader looked, and readers were enthusiastically looking. . . . Biography was not simply a genre of writing. In an age before radio and television, it was *the* medium that allowed people to learn about public figures and peer into the lives of strangers. Twice in midcentury, periodicals summed up the situation; Americans had a "Biographical Mania."¹

What were they searching for? Why did they seek to find it in biography? Casper rightly suggests that "biographers and critics and readers alike believed that biography had power: the power to shape individuals' lives and character and to help define America's national character." He then goes on to distinguish "nineteenth-century Biographical Mania" from the present-day "culture of biography" that biographer Justin Kaplan identified in 1994, suggesting that modern readers are obsessed with "curiosity about famous figures" and are not as interested in "the deeper purpose of building readers', viewers', or a nation's character."²

In truth, however, both twentieth- and twenty-first-century biography have continued to serve many of the same purposes Casper identified for the nineteenth century, including giving lessons from individual life stories and helping to define and, often, redefine the contours of the American nation. Americans today may want or need to learn different lessons than people in the past—or learn them in ways more consonant with the demands of contemporary life. Or today's lessons may be the same ones delivered in the past, described in different terms. Stories about leadership, overcoming adversity, engendering creativity—these are all features of many of the most popular biographies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. People turn to them to learn things, just as their nineteenth-century counterparts sought instructions from the life stories they read. For example, there can be little doubt that many people bought Walter Isaacson's

¹ Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999), 1–2.

² *Ibid.*, 2 (quotations).

extremely popular biography of Steve Jobs to find out how Jobs achieved his success.³ What were the secrets to his advancement in life, and how might those secrets enhance lives that would never be lived on Jobs's scale but might be aided in some fashion by his example? Even further, what did his success say about the nature of American creativity and innovation? The answer often suggested was that Jobs, Bill Gates, and other pioneers of the tech revolution of the 1970s were uniquely American creations.

The bold assertion "only in America," usually proclaimed after the description of an individual life story shaped by the peculiar circumstances of residence in the United States, encapsulates a particular vision of what America offers that other societies supposedly do not. How this country allows individuals to build their life stories is placed at the heart of the American story. There are powerful counternarratives, of course, about individuals—members of disfavored minority groups and women—who have not been allowed to make the most of what the country has to offer. These stories are most often presented as examples of the failures of the experiment that can and will be rectified over time.

Before Jobs, of course, there was George Washington. Parson M. L. Weems's imperishable *Life of George Washington*, which opened Casper's century of "Biographical Mania," helped put in motion the process of using biography as a vehicle for personal and national construction. Its most famous anecdote (probably apocryphal)—about the young Washington who could not "tell a lie" when his father, Augustine Washington, confronted him about the chopped-down cherry tree—was meant to establish not only Washington's essential goodness, which the reader should endeavor to emulate, but also the goodness of the country of which he was the father.⁴ The tale of Washington and the cherry tree has lived through the ages because it presents a situation likely familiar to most people: a child takes a rash action that he knows will draw the disapproval of a parent, authority figure, or loved one. The action will most assuredly be discovered, because the results of the act are too clear to remain hidden. The tree was standing. The tree had been chopped down. What was little George to say?

Weems's readers are invited to consider what they would do in that situation and take note of the young Washington's honor and/or sangfroid in this instance of great tension. The reader lives for a moment in the skin of Weems's subject at a critical juncture and can reflect upon some aspect of the human condition that links the subject to the reader across time and space.

³ Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (New York, 2011).

⁴ M. L. Weems, *The Life of George Washington; with Curious Anecdotes. . . .* (Philadelphia, n.d.), 16 (quotation). The cover illustration from the *William and Mary Quarterly*-EMSI Workshop "Early American Biographies" poster is a depiction of the Washington cherry tree story; see Grant Wood, *Parson Weems' Fable*, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, 1970.43.

This presentation assumes that it matters little that Washington was a member of the Virginia slaveholding class who lived a very different life from most of the people who shared the planet with him at the time—certainly different from the lives of people encountering *The Life of George Washington* in the centuries since it appeared. He was a human being, and this brief foray into the role of honesty, trust, and honor could be understood by individuals with experiences far different from those of the young Washington. Even people who might answer Augustine's question differently could recognize the issue at hand.

This recognition of shared humanity is what most biographers hope to prompt, to render their subjects—if not always admirable or lovable—at least understandable to readers. There are many ways to do this. One of the quickest, however, is to provide a framework, as Weems's hoary tale does, for the development of the kind of empathy and recognition of common humanity that at a minimum opens the door to understanding and stokes curiosity. The epigraph to Ruchama King Feuerman's novel *In the Courtyard of the Kabbalist* explains this process very well: "If I tell you my story, / you will listen for awhile / and then you will fall asleep. / But, if, as I tell you my story, / you begin to hear your own story, / you will wake up."⁵ Significantly, one can create these connections whether one is writing about a George Washington or, say, a Sally Hemings, who as an enslaved woman occupied space at the opposite end of Virginia's social spectrum. We know much more about Washington than Hemings. And when a subject has left behind a voluminous record, there are many more opportunities for biographers to find and relate stories that foster connections between the reader and the subject. In truth, Weems could have accomplished this for Washington without making up anything.

For those who have left behind few or no written traces of their lives, all is not necessarily lost. Having fewer records simply requires adjusting one's attitude and expectations. Hemings, for example, left no written records of her life. What we know of her can be determined from what people wrote about her in newspapers, some private letters, family history, and Thomas Jefferson's records of life at Monticello. She lived as a person whose humanity was disregarded by law, and for many years historians wrote of her as if they had to follow the law's prescription. Even without her words, though we can tell the story of a fourteen-year-old enslaved girl sent on an ocean voyage to a foreign land as the caretaker of a nine-year-old who was also her niece. Not long after this momentous event, she was sent to undergo a dangerous medical procedure among strangers—an English speaker amid Francophones. Only one doggedly determined not to connect to Hemings could fail to wonder and imagine

⁵ Ruchama King Feuerman, *In the Courtyard of the Kabbalist* (New York, 2013), epigraph (Hassidic saying).

what this was like for her and to ponder the contours of a world in which experiences such as hers could take place.

Of course Weems's effort was a primitive early American version of what has come to be called, and maligned as, "Great Man history." Despite the heavy criticism of the form, it has had a marked influence upon our expectations of what biographies should be like. A subject, considered worthy of treatment, becomes paired with a biographer who has mastered the documentary record of the subject's life—and there are documents because the subject is a Great Man—and can provide comprehensive, clear, and definitive treatment of the life. That expectation weighs heavily on those who wish to write about a person who is not considered "great," and for whom there is no extensive paper trail.

The progress of Great Man history from Weems's time to our own bears the mark of the expansion of America's democracy and cultural life. As each marginal group has sought to claim a place of respect and dignity in American society, the demand to move beyond Great Man history has grown ever more insistent. But during the time that white males' power was largely unchallenged, the value of Great Man history was considered by some to be self-evident. The nineteenth-century social commentator and essayist Thomas Carlyle perhaps put it best when he laid down the purposes that biography served: "The history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain."⁶ Biographies of Great Men were, in effect, the essence of history. Investigating and writing about the lives of people who did not wield power or through their individual effort help shape the course of history was of little point. Carlyle would have had no use for Hemings and her family.

Although Carlyle was not an American, his understanding of the purposes of biography was prevalent in the United States. In his 1874 study of Jefferson, James Parton, who has been called the "Father of Modern Biography," captured the essence of Carlyle's formulation when he famously proclaimed that "if Jefferson was wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right."⁷ The conflation of man and nation was unfair to both, but particularly to Jefferson. To the extent that anyone accepts this notion, each personal mistake looms as a disservice to the country and, by extension, to history. Personal failures that would be of little or no moment in others' lives take on national import. That is a heavy burden for even a Great Man to bear.

⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History: Six Lectures* (London, 1840), 1–2.

⁷ James Parton, *Life of Thomas Jefferson: Third President of the United States* (Boston, 1874), iii ("if Jefferson"); Milton E. Flower, *James Parton: The Father of Modern Biography* (Durham, N.C., 1951).

Presenting the biographies of Great Men as object lessons to members of the public thus presumed that everyone shared the biographer's view of the men whose lives were chronicled. It is not likely that the very conservative Carlyle had any notion that the masses would use the lessons learned from Great Men in any way that would alter the basic structure of society—bringing large numbers of those on the bottom to the top. Instead, some of the lessons learned from the lives of the “Great”—virtue and perseverance, for example—could be stripped down and made useful to individuals on any rung of the social strata without any move toward social leveling.

Even before the movements for social justice helped spur historians to take a more capacious view of who could be the subject of biography, there were rumblings of discontent with the traditional form of biography. Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, published in 1918, is often credited with changing the genre forever—on both sides of the Atlantic. Gone were the hagiographical tone and the sense that the lives of his subjects provided uplifting object lessons to readers. Strachey's subjects were not heroes, and he wasted little time in making that point. His presentation was streamlined in comparison with more traditional biographies that were typically long, if not actually multivolume. More than anything, however, it was Strachey's new tone—intimate, probing, critical, and very much influenced by Sigmund Freud—that captured attention as it completely upended the conventional wisdom of what biographies were supposed to be about: that is to say, Carlyle's vision and the vision that fueled the “Biographical Mania” of which Casper writes. Instead, Strachey encouraged biographers to employ a “freedom of spirit” as they laid “bare the facts of the case.” This new type of biography brought exposing the clay feet of heroes into vogue. He also challenged the idea that the accumulation of discrete facts could lead to real knowledge about a topic. “The history of the Victorian Age will never be written: we know too much about it,” he proclaimed in the preface to his work.⁸ Strachey viewed the historian/biographer as someone more akin to an artist than a scientist who was to look deeper to discover the nature of the subject under consideration, a move that puts the biographer very close to the novelist who seeks to derive truths from a vision of human nature.

It has long been apparent that writing the history of early America requires more than a focus on the lives of the powerful and well documented. It is also clear that delving into the lives of the less powerful and less documented will require pairing the instincts of a detective with the subtlety and nuance of an artist, much in the same manner that Strachey suggested for his more well-known Victorians. And there is something else. Although

⁸ Lucy Riall, “The Shallow End of History: The Substance and Future of Political Biography,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2010): 375–97, esp. 378–79; Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (Garden City, N.Y., [1918]), vii (“freedom”), v (“history of the Victorian”).

it is true that we can all learn from the examples of the Washingtons of the era, it is also true that presenting such people as the standard or universal personages for identification tends to obscure the effects of unbridled power and privilege, as well as the diversity of experiences of those in the past and of present-day readers. Creative means must be employed to broaden the story in ways that give a richer presentation of early American life and, if readers are looking for this, a wider range of exemplary lives from whom they can learn.

Biographies of Great Men from the American founding clearly attract eager readers among the public and critics within the historical profession, but I came to write about one who is considered a Great Man of this period in order to address a particular problem in the writing of history. In my first book, I focused on how generations of historians had written about the relationship between Jefferson and Hemings. I did so not because I thought the situation was earth-shattering—the idea that an enslaved woman had children by a slave master seemed quite banal. Instead, I was concerned about the way the words of former enslaved people had been treated in the historiography over the years and, especially, about the way historians had subjected the words of African Americans to extra scrutiny when they contradicted the words of white people. Madison Hemings and Israel Gillette Jefferson, who were enslaved, were treated as untrustworthy, while Jefferson's publicly acknowledged grandchildren, Ellen Randolph Coolidge and Thomas Jefferson Randolph, were given the presumption of believability. This way of thinking distorted the family story—the biographies, if you will—of Sally Hemings, her children, and the rest of the Hemings family who shared life at Monticello with Thomas Jefferson. If biographies of the founding generation were supposed to tell us something about the development of our history, the distortion of Jefferson's biography—and the too-quick rejection of Hemings's—served to mislead us about that past, particularly on the matters of slavery and race.

It occurred to me after writing my first book that one of the reasons (besides race and class) that people could dismiss the words of the enslaved blacks who spoke about Hemings and Jefferson is that most people did not know anything about the Hemingses as individuals, whereas they believed they “knew” Jefferson and his legal white family. This putative knowledge of the Jeffersons and Randolphs gave those who read about them a stake in the presentation of their lives, as demonstrated by the sometimes extreme and over-the-top defenses of Jefferson on the subject of Hemings based upon a perceived knowledge of his character. Up until the final decade of the twentieth century, Jefferson scholarship rarely presented enslaved people as individuals in their own right, and there was little, besides sympathy for enslaved people overall, to give readers a similar stake in how their lives were depicted. *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* was, in part, an attempt to rectify that problem by treating individual members of the

family as valid biographical subjects—to write about Sally Hemings, Elizabeth Hemings, and James Hemings as individuals with life stories, not as a generic enslaved girl, an enslaved mother, and an enslaved man.⁹

Because of my efforts in writing the biography of the Hemingses, I was very excited to convene the *William and Mary Quarterly*-EMSI workshop on “Early American Biographies” at the Huntington Library in May of 2012. Our task was to present and discuss papers that showed the many ways in which the medium of biography could help illuminate “the history of early America,” understanding that “a true picture” of the country’s early days “would include biographies of people at all levels of the social spectrum.”¹⁰ To that end, the workshop organizers selected papers that covered the lives of individuals from the famous to the completely obscure, from different races, cultures, and positions on the social ladder. Some could be considered powerful in their spheres of life, while others were anything but influential.

Steven W. Hackel’s Father Junípero Serra, Gregory Nobles’s John James Audubon, and Catherine O’Donnell’s Elizabeth Seton were the most conventional subjects of biography among the group, but each of their stories added complexity to the picture of life in early America. Jenny Hale Pulsipher’s John Wompas, Joshua Piker’s Acorn Whistler, and Michael Oberg’s Eleazer Williams invited consideration of Native American men as they attempted to negotiate life in an emerging world that really had no place for them. Martha S. Jones, through the life of the enslaved Popete, and James Sidbury and James H. Sweet, through their meditation on the tough question of discerning identity when writing biographies of people of African descent, explored the difficult but necessary task of bringing the experiences of the enslaved into the historical picture. Rachel Hope Cleves’s Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake lived together, apparently, as a married couple in a small New England town, certainly not a circumstance that has been woven into the fabric of early American history.

It is important to note that this workshop was not a move or statement against Great Man history. It was instead an affirmation that American history can be told through the lives of those who lived under the power wielded by so-called Great Men and Women as effectively as, if not, in some cases, more effectively than, it can be told through the lives of the Great themselves. How to do this in the most effective way was the central question of the workshop, one whose answer could only be found by raising other questions.

What, if any, are the special hazards of writing about the life of a marginalized individual in society, such as an enslaved person who managed to stand out in some way and was, therefore, not representative of his or her

⁹ Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York, 2008).

¹⁰ Call for proposals, “Early American Biographies,” 2012 *WMQ*-EMSI workshop, (quotations).

cohort? Is the illumination of one life worth the possible distorting effect it may have on a reader's views of slavery or other oppressive systems?¹¹ How does one write a good story with limited documentary evidence, while maintaining the standards of scholarship? In other words, how do we make a biography read like a novel without allowing parts of the work to become one?

What about the biographer identifying with the subject? The biographer who grows so wedded to the subject that it becomes difficult to have anything approaching the objective viewpoint that historians at least strive to maintain is almost a cliché. This is more often seen as a problem among those who chronicle the lives of the powerful, because more is at stake. Presidents, prominent business executives, kings, and the like took actions that affected the lives of many, often shaping the course of history in the process. Too great an affinity for, or identification with, such people might lead to downplaying their mistakes or being too eager to explain them away. This would have serious consequences, not just for understanding that person's life but also for seeing clearly the world in which he or she lived.

The relationship between "Biographer and Subject" is, according to Allen Hibbard, "A Tale of Two Narratives."

The enterprise of writing biography necessarily involves two distinct, yet related, narrative strands: the story of the subject and the story of the biographer coming to know, structure and recreate the life of the subject. Through the process, the relationship between biographer and subject becomes particularly tight, producing

¹¹ One of the most consistent complaints about biographies as a form is that they present a distorted picture of the past. "Biography, by tradition, if not by definition," Judith P. Zinsser writes, "has been about the extra-ordinary person, a particular individual who in some manner did something deemed noteworthy by the conventional canons of significance"; see Zinsser, "Feminist Biography," *Eighteenth Century* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 43–50 (quotation, 44). For example, even though they do not fit the contours of so-called Great Man history, there is little doubt that the Hemings family of Monticello was extraordinary. Because of their connection to a famous and important man, some of them were able to travel in ways that most enslaved people were not and had lives very different even from other enslaved people at Monticello. Thomas Jefferson's inveterate record keeping left us valuable information about their lives, whereas the vast majority of enslaved people will remain obscure. Because of blood ties to his wife and to himself, some of them were able to leave slavery behind. For these and other reasons, the Hemingses have entered history in a way that millions of others who shared their legal status never will. There is some sentiment that focusing on their life stories may mislead people about the nature of the institution of slavery. The solution to this problem, to the extent that there is one, is transparency. An effective rendering of the Hemingses' lives would put them in the context of their time and place. Measuring their lives against the lives of other enslaved people tells the story of slavery as it existed. If some choose to see the family as representative in the face of those contrasts and comparisons, that is not the biographer's fault.

intense identification, admiration, disgust, or aspects of all of these and other emotions. As Paula Backscheider puts it:

The biographer becomes the subject's closest ally and bitterest enemy. All biographers must be their subjects' advocates, taking up the burden of explaining lives and why they were led as they were. And so they become closer than mother, wife, school friend; they see through the subject's eyes, try to feel exactly what hurt about each painful event. But only an enemy touches the very soul, probes until the deepest, most shameful secrets and the most raw aches lie exposed, trembling in the light under the surgeon's dissecting tool. We do that no matter how passionately we love and respect our "subject."¹²

Hibbard's description presents the biographer acting at the highest level of the craft, finding the proper balance between empathy and judgment, and attachment and detachment: a position hard to achieve, harder still to maintain. One starts with the best of intentions, but as one lives with the person over time—watches him or her grow, marry, have children, lose children, do and say awful things, have hopes, be disappointed, and display kindness, pettiness, tenderness, and brilliance—one has to fight to maintain the degree of separation that will allow a balanced portrait to emerge. Too often the battle is lost. "Biographers," Jill Lepore writes, "are notorious for falling in and out of love with the people they write about." Some of them simply "love too much" and, often, hate too much.¹³ Indeed, one finds a belief that this is how it must be. There is an expectation—a certainty among many—that strong feeling, usually love, must be present whenever a person decides to write about the life of another and carries the decision through. One could ask the participants in the workshop why they fixated on their subjects so intently that they have written about them and intend to write more. The expectation of love

¹² Allen Hibbard, "Biographer and Subject: A Tale of Two Narratives," *South Central Review* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 19–36 (quotation, 19–20).

¹³ Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (June 2001): 129–44 ("Biographers," 133, "love too much," 129). How often over the years have I been asked how I "feel about Thomas Jefferson"! Others claim to know the answer: some are absolutely convinced that I love him while others are equally convinced that I hate him. I am at once busy hiding Jefferson's flaws in order to build him up and trumpeting his faults as part of a plan to destroy him. The distinction between loving Jefferson, or another figure, as a subject for serious study and supposedly loving Jefferson (or some construction of Jefferson, because no one alive today can know the real Jefferson) is too often lost. Recognizing the difference between those two approaches is the best argument for biography's capacity to stand as good history.

does not hold for other forms of narrative history, where simple curiosity and desire for intellectual engagement are usually sufficient reasons for undertaking a historical project.

To ask the famous question, “What’s love got to do with it?” How close to the truth of a subject’s life can a biographer really get when he or she falls in love with—or sometimes grows to hate—the subject? A lover or hater is not, by definition, objective. Total objectivity is neither possible nor required. It can exist, at best, along a continuum. It is imperative to approach a subject’s life with enough distance to allow one to see the field of complexity and contradictions—without taking any discordant notes personally—and to present what one finds to readers. As Lepore aptly phrases it, writing the life of a person is “tricky work,” given the necessity of balancing “intimacy with distance.”¹⁴ But how is one to do that when biographers must get close enough to their subjects to observe them well and bring to life for readers what they have learned of these individuals?

Consider the case of Dumas Malone, the great biographer of Jefferson. Malone’s magisterial six-volume work, *Jefferson and His Time*, took nearly four decades to complete—from the post–World War II years to the disco era. By the time the last volume appeared, Malone had become thoroughly connected to Jefferson in the public mind. Even reviewers inclined to view the volumes favorably gently hinted that Malone had become too involved with his subject to give anything close to an objective view of the man from Monticello. Though he was adept at being Jefferson’s “closest ally,” he rarely could bring himself to play the vital role of Jefferson’s “bitterest enemy”—the one who probed his subject’s “deepest, most shameful secrets” and his “most raw aches.”¹⁵

There is no doubt that Malone developed a deep identification with Jefferson and that his construction of Jefferson’s character very often seemed to turn the eighteenth-century patriarchal slave owner into a twentieth-century upper-middle-class southern gentleman academic, someone very much like Professor Malone himself. Under this construction, Jefferson would not do things that Malone would not do, and he would respond to things in the way that Malone, or one akin to Malone, would respond. One never senses any recognition of, or true concern about, the actual nature and magnitude of the power that Jefferson wielded over the more than seven hundred people he owned during the course of his adult life, a power that made him unlike anyone who lived in America during Malone’s time. Overidentification does not lead to true understanding.

Malone is, of course, an extreme example. And in fairness to him, his view of Jefferson did change slightly over the many years he worked

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁵ Paula Backscheider, quoted in Hibbard, *South Central Review* 23: 20; Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, 6 vols. (Boston, 1948–81).

on his multivolume set. By the time he wrote his last volume, *The Sage of Monticello*, he had come to realize that Jefferson was a much more interesting and complicated man than he had portrayed in the first volume, *Jefferson the Virginian*.¹⁶ Very few biographers spend four decades living with their subjects. But it does not take forty years for the phenomenon of too close identification to come into play. Overidentification, however quickly achieved, is invariably hazardous to biography.

Even if biographers have not overidentified with their subjects, they may be wrongly assumed to have done so. This arises from the basic structure of the biographical enterprise. There is an author and a subject in a one-on-one engagement. Even a collective biography pulls the author into a close association with another human being, though carried out in seriatim. The circumstances make it easy for observers to connect the author to the subject, to imagine (or charge, depending upon how the connection is viewed) that the minds of biographer and subject have melded in some meaningful way. That melding of the minds would make the biographer protective of the subject and take any criticisms personally—as if the biographer were being attacked. Under those circumstances, the tendency might be to construct a life that was as free from reproach as possible. For example, the subject's faults might be acknowledged but presented in the guise of exaggerated virtues—the subject is just too trusting, too much of a perfectionist, too willing to listen to all points of view for his or her own good.

No one thinks authors imagine themselves as the Civil War, the War of 1812, or the ideological origins of anything. Authors may be intensely interested in them, but subjects such as those cannot be contained within the personality of any one individual. Without the one-to-one connection between biographer and subject, the thought of a melded personality—pairing biographer and subject off into the form of a couple who are as one—makes no sense. Of course, historians who do not write biographies and concentrate instead on politics, social life, culture, or other fields can be biased in their presentations, fail to sufficiently contextualize the circumstances about which they write (because they wish the reader to adopt a particular view about events), and make many of the same mistakes that biographers make. Each work should be judged on its own merits rather than dismissed because of the genre in which it is presented.

Malone was writing about one of the most powerful and consequential figures in American history. If identifying too strongly with a powerful subject is wrong, is it equally problematic to identify strongly with an obscure, powerless individual? Does it perpetuate hierarchy and obscure past injustice to the same degree? Should that be a consideration for the biographer/historian?

¹⁶ Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, vols. 1 and 6.

These questions, and the ones posed earlier, are set against the backdrop of some degree of uncertainty among academic historians and other commentators about biography as a form of history. Despite all the changes and innovations in life writing that have taken place over the past three decades—changes that have enriched our understanding of American history—questions remain about biography as a means of conveying this information. In 2007 the American Historical Association sponsored a seminar entitled “Writing Past Lives: Biography as History” to answer, among other things, the question “Why write biography?” Of course the conveners and participants had clear and completely convincing answers for why the genre was critical for helping us understand the past, but one could not imagine a gathering devoted to asking, for example, “Why write history?”

In her 2009 defense of biography, “Biography as History,” Lois W. Banner set forth three of the most commonly voiced reasons for skepticism about the project of writing the story of individual lives: “Historians in general . . . often rank biography as an *inferior type of history*. They see it as inherently limited because it involves only one life, derives from a belles-lettres tradition rather than a scientific or sociological one, and is often written by non-academic historians who attract a lot of readers but lack the rigor of Ph.D.-trained scholars.”¹⁷

The first and third of the expressed concerns are unfounded as general statements about the nature of biography as a form. Although there is, without question, some danger (for both the biographer and the reader) that seeing the world through the eyes of one person may skew the view of the times in which the subject lived, the substance and structure of the presentation matter greatly—as do the creativity and work ethic of the biographer. Any life writing that fixated on the person to the exclusion of the world around that individual would fail as a project—and not due to any inherent problem with biographies. Good historians and good biographers know that context matters, whether writing about a single event or a single person. Perhaps the best model that workshop participants who are writing about obscure, or relatively obscure, people could follow is Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, who famously took the diary of one woman and wrested from it an

¹⁷ Lois W. Banner, “Biography as History,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 579–86 (quotation, 580, emphasis added). Lori D. Ginzberg, careful to say that she did not think biography “a lesser genre,” confessed to not caring much for the form in general. While the decision to write a biography herself prompted a reassessment of her basic view, she remained ambivalent, expressing her “puzzlement”—shared, she suggested, by “many historians”—“that people actually *read* biographies; more, that they love them.” While Ginzberg acquired a measure of respect for biographies, she maintained that for the most part “books that focus on the individual life” are often “too exclusive, too self-absorbed.”; see Ginzberg, “The Pleasures (and Dangers) of Biography,” review of *How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present*, by Alison Booth, *Frances Power Cobbe: Victorian Feminist, Journalist, Reformer*, by Sally Mitchell, and *Viola Florence Barnes, 1885–1979: A Historian’s Biography*, by John G. Reid, *Journal of Women’s History* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 205–12 (quotations, 205).

amazing amount of information about work, birth, death, and family in the early days of the United States. One can see the world in which Martha Ballard lived.¹⁸ Ulrich used her detective skills to flesh out Ballard's often very cryptic references and to open up the world of the past, asking the right questions and, most importantly of all, refusing to accept the idea that there were no answers.

As to the concern about the prevalence of nonacademics in the field of biography, the tensions that sometimes exist between academic historians and popular historians are well known. Academics charge that those who write popular biographies too often lack a sophisticated and nuanced approach to history, and popular historians say that academics cannot write. But there certainly have been people outside of the academy—Robert Caro and Jean Strouse come immediately to mind—who have produced superbly written and deeply researched biographies that could not have been any better had either of them been professors.¹⁹

Banner's reference to biography's roots in *belles lettres*, instead of what might be considered more rigorously scholarly fields, perhaps comes closest to getting at the reason for some of the persistent unease about biography. Linking the genre to its origins in a type of literature that exists for the beauty of the language for its own sake, with no specific aim to convey serious information or provide critical analysis, suggests it has a variant DNA from the discipline of history. In this view, history and biography are clearly within the same family, but they differ in ways that do no credit to biography, which is cast as a sort of less talented cousin to history. The implication—a wrong one, to be sure—is that biography cannot (and has not) moved beyond its roots in a form that is now considered, if not exactly frivolous, insubstantial when compared to other forms of historical writing. Though biographies can be pleasing to read, some argue, they cannot really be taken too seriously. Indeed, that so many people grasp them so easily and enjoy them so much—more than any other form of historical writing, biographies regularly appear on best-seller lists—is considered evidence of the nonserious nature of the enterprise.

There is suspicion of the enthusiasm that biographies engender, both from the reader and from the writer. Lori D. Ginzberg describes her reaction to this response: "Something about the biographical narrative—about living in another's skin, about identifying with a person from another time, another world, about imagining oneself in a heroic moment—draws people as few nonfiction genres do."²⁰ Readers of biographies, Ginzberg suggests, are looking to identify with, if not actually fall in love with, the subject.

¹⁸ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York, 1990).

¹⁹ See for example Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York, 1975); Jean Strouse, *Alice James: A Biography* (Boston, 1980).

²⁰ Ginzberg, *Journal of Women's History* 19: 205.

This will to identification—encouraged by the biographer—is antithetical to the aims of a truly intellectual endeavor, where a degree of detachment and objectivity is considered foundational to the scholarly project. One who reads the biography of a beloved figure does not necessarily want to have the hero's life subjected to critical analysis—or, at least, too much critical analysis. In that situation, Ginzberg's intuition suggests a great likelihood that readers who want to identify with the biographer's subject may resent a biographer's criticisms. A well-written, smoothly presented, beautiful story will often be preferred. Significantly, these observations apply to the biographer as well.

In *Le Nausée*, Jean-Paul Sartre's character Roquentin posits that “biography is . . . an impossibility, a work of ‘pure imagination’ emanating from the biographer, and bearing no verifiable resemblance to the supposed subject. Biography is fiction, but without the freedom that the novel bestows on the writer.”²¹ What are some of the attributes of that freedom? The first is the capacity to invent. Novelists can create things out of whole cloth—people, events, circumstances—which biographers and historians must never do. Having created the protagonist and supporting characters, novelists know, because they put it there, all that is inside those characters' heads—for example, feelings, doubts, and motivations. The reader knows this and accepts the reality that novelists bring into being.

Biographers are not similarly omniscient. And even in the most well-documented life there are significant and numerous gaps in the record—things left unsaid and situations not described. Having been drawn into the intimacy of a one-on-one connection with another individual (the subject and, to a degree, the biographer), the reader wants to know more. The writer does, too! Workshop participants wrestled with this issue during our discussions. How does one satisfy (or perhaps resist) the desire to fill in the blanks of the narrative or get inside the head of the subject and figure out why he or she took or failed to take a particular action? Can the gaps be filled—should they be filled—with speculation? How is that done? The phrases “may have,” “must have,” or “probably,” which appear often in biographies, tend to detract from the authoritative voice that many expect to hear in works of history. There is, however, no way to completely avoid this when trying to tell the story of a person's life and convey something that can be known imperfectly, if at all—the inner workings of another human being's mind.

Although readers may take a certain comfort in the authoritative voice—*this is the answer*—that suggests expertise and confidence, that voice sometimes conveys information that is dead wrong. On the other hand, informed speculation, couched in qualifying terms that may annoy, can

²¹ Peter France and William St. Clair, eds., *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography* (Oxford, 2002), 1–5 (quotation, 1).

actually be correct. One may not have the satisfaction of having a clear answer, but all is not lost. In the best-case scenario, the reader is given a well-defined range of probable answers that still convey valuable food for thought. So long as biographers alert readers to what they are doing, there is no problem. Readers can accept the speculation or reject it based upon an assessment of the strength of the information offered to support it and the overall quality of the biographer's presentation of other material that can be more thoroughly documented and analyzed. The totality of the biographer's work signals the level of trust the readers should put into it.

That biographers cannot know their subjects in the way novelists know the characters they have created does not convert biography into fiction any more than all historical works are to be equated with novels. I have written in another context that "history is to a great degree an imaginative enterprise," meaning not that historians and biographers are free to invent things as novelists do but that we endeavor "to see the subjects in their time and space."²² In the absence of time travel, imagining this is all we can ever do.

Another freedom that novelists possess is to use the craft of writing to conjure feelings and promote beliefs through the magic of carefully arranged words. They do not have to prove what they say about any given subject. The truths they express are not the kind that can be established through footnotes or endnotes. The truths of novels and other great works of fiction are usually grounded in the belief that there is, in fact, a human nature to be explicated and that there are continuing themes in the human condition that exist across time and space in different settings and cultures—ambition, love, greed, hubris. They may express themselves in different ways, but they are, nevertheless, there. Novels, plays, and other forms of fiction that successfully discover and tap into those universal themes become what we call classics. Generations read, understand, and enjoy these works as if the ideas and sentiments expressed within them are completely new and fresh.

Historians tend toward greater skepticism of claims about human nature, eschew essentializing, and focus more on the foreignness of the past, how different we are from those who lived long ago. Discovering the ways in which the people of the past differed from us requires attention to details obtained from records and artifacts of those times. Historical truths are gleaned from a strict adherence to interpreting the data that one gathers and reporting it as accurately as possible. Biographers who follow these precepts may indeed arrive at truths about their subjects that are as valuable and reliable as those presented in any other nonbiographical works of history. But biographers must, at some level, believe that there are always connections to be made between people in the past and those who read about them, as well as those who write about them.

²² Gordon-Reed, *Hemingses of Monticello*, 31.

On the question of writing, in his 2013 presidential address before the American Historical Association, William Cronon made the case for the virtues of storytelling and urged academic historians to become better at it. That Cronon had to make this plea, one that echoed similar exhortations in presidential addresses past, says a great deal about the status of storytelling in a profession that heavily prizes analysis and values complicating or problematizing the picture of the past. Indeed, during the question-and-answer period at a conference session on writing narrative history in which I was a participant, a graduate student reminded those assembled that although it was all well and good to talk about the virtues of writing narrative histories and storytelling, that was not what her adviser and those of her cohort expected in the way of dissertations from their students. She and her cohort were expected to produce works with the kind of analytic heavy lifting most prized in the academy.

Biography, of course, is the ultimate form of storytelling in that a life comes with an easily discernible beginning, middle, and end—if the subject is dead. If the subject is alive, he or she still must have gone far enough down the road of life, and achieved enough things, to have a logical line for a story, even one that has not yet ended. Biographers do not necessarily eschew analysis as they set forth the story of their subject's life. The good ones always analyze. But sustained analysis most often requires deviation from the straight line of any story being told. The author must veer away from talking about the subject's progress through life and take time to explain a particular phenomenon. Storytelling can work well with digressions, but not too many and none that go on too long.

Sometimes the picture is so complicated that a storyline will not do the job that has to be done. There came a moment while I was writing *The Hemingses of Monticello* when it became apparent that straight storytelling would not be sufficient to convey the circumstances of Sally Hemings's life in Paris and the context in which her relationship with Thomas Jefferson began. I had gotten both James and Sally Hemings to the French capital and was able to describe their extraordinary lives there, mixing the story with analysis in a way that kept the narrative flowing without, I thought, any loss of complexity. When I came to the topic of Sally Hemings and Jefferson, however, I realized that the matter was so important, and so vulnerable to determined misunderstanding, that storytelling—and then Hemings did this, and then Hemings did that—would not do. After consulting with my editor, I decided to break the story line. This also required stepping out of my role as storyteller to address readers directly. I had to explain what I was doing and give my reason for moving “away from strict narrative” to discuss the complicated nature of this sixteen-year-old's life—the particularities of her family history, her status as an enslaved person in a place where she could become free, and the way her life story had been told to date.²³ After

²³ *Ibid.*, 289.

a detour through what my editor referred to as “those analytical chapters,” I picked up the story line again, maintaining a more usual balance between narrative and analysis. The issue of how to set that balance occurs in non-biographical narrative writing too. An imbalance is likely more jarring, however, when the biographer has invited the reader to follow a person through a narrative and then strands the person for pages while the biographer spends time analyzing a particular issue or circumstance.

ALL OF BIOGRAPHY’S STRENGTHS and the concerns about biography as a form apply to works about the well-known and the obscure. Though most of the papers presented at the *WMQ-EMSI* workshop dealt with the lives of people whose names would not be recognizable to most Americans, we began with a paper about a man who is likely known, or should be known, to all native Californians: Steven W. Hackel’s “The Many Worlds of Father Junípero Serra, California’s Founding Father.”²⁴ Of all the biographical subjects we discussed, Father Serra comes closest to the designation Great Man, as the term has been commonly used. Very importantly, his story reminds us that the history of early America is not to be found only on the Eastern Seaboard or even in the English language. Nearly all the major issues of the day—European contact with Native peoples, conquest, forced assimilation, and death—are present in Serra’s story. There is also ambivalence. Serra’s is a complicated life story, one involving a tragic encounter with the Native American population that resulted in the destruction of Native culture through disease and outright oppression.

From whose perspective should Serra’s story be told? One often hears the admonition that historians and biographers should see the world through the eyes of their subject, very often a powerful person. This is a constant refrain in writing about Thomas Jefferson—or any of the founders—and slavery, a view that I find problematic, as it may prevent serious grappling with the moral implications of living off slave labor. In addition to wanting to chronicle the lives of several generations of an enslaved family, I wrote *The Heminges of Monticello* as a prelude to writing a two-volume biography of Jefferson. The exercise of seeing him through the eyes of those whom he held in bondage, I believed, would give me a more balanced view of the world he surveyed. As Serra’s biographer, Hackel had his hands full because his subject’s life is linked to a much larger and contentious story about the meaning of conquest and colonization. Serra was one of the “modellers” or “patterns” of which Thomas Carlyle spoke. But unlike the nineteenth century, modern-day observers who sympathize with the people who bore the brunt of Serra’s actions will also have a say in how his life story is received.

²⁴ Steven W. Hackel, “The Many Worlds of Father Junípero Serra, California’s Founding Father,” paper presented at the 2012 *WMQ-EMSI* workshop.

Although Jenny Hale Pulsipher's subjects in "A Seventeenth-Century Indian in King Charles's Court: The Atlantic Worlds of John Wompas" were on the opposite side of the continent from Father Serra, the difficulties and tragedies of the encounter between Native Americans and Europeans—in this case Europeans of English extraction—were essentially the same.²⁵ Religion, assimilation, and violence defined the terms of engagement in both zones. Serra converted Indians. John Wompas's parents were Indian converts to Christianity. He had extensive contact with whites. Indeed, that he lived with a white family as a teenager and was accepted to Harvard University were not significant after the onset of King Philip's War. The colonists turned against Indians, converted or not.

What are the limits of the imagination when one seeks to reconstruct the life of a person who left few, if any, documents—when one has to piece together a life out of snippets of events or individual actions, or when what exists of a documentary record is riddled with error and ambiguity? Evidence is the life's blood of history. At what point is there so little of it that one determines that there is nothing useful to be done? This is a particularly fraught question when the proposed subjects of the biography are members of groups in early America whose stories are less often a part of the historical narrative. Two of the workshop papers, Martha S. Jones's "Popote: A Life History of Slavery, Law, and the Haitian Diaspora" and Joshua Piker's "'called by us the Acorn Whistler': Biography, Microhistory, and the Ragged Edge of the Historical Record," attempted to reconstruct the lives of people when the details are "all but invisible to us."²⁶

Piker's *Acorn Whistler*, though obscure to us, was a pivotal figure in a conflict among Native Americans and Europeans that threatened to lead to war in 1752–53. His execution prompted separate stories that Piker uses not because they give accurate details about *Acorn Whistler's* life—they do not—but for what the competing stories reveal about the culture in which *Acorn Whistler* and those who killed him lived. The "truth" Piker is after is "to be found . . . in the relationship between the stories." We may not be able to know *Acorn Whistler* according to the dictates of traditional biography that require a more extensive consideration of his inner life. But we can still learn something of the moment in which he lived and see the "ambiguity, negotiation, and conflict that characterized [his] intimately intertwined and inescapably insecure world."²⁷

²⁵ Jenny Hale Pulsipher, "A Seventeenth-Century Indian in King Charles's Court: The Atlantic Worlds of John Wompas," paper presented at the 2012 *WMQ-EMSI* workshop.

²⁶ Joshua Piker, "'called by us the Acorn Whistler': Biography, Microhistory, and the Ragged Edge of the Historical Record," paper presented at the 2012 *WMQ-EMSI* workshop, 1 (quotation); Martha S. Jones, "Popote: A Life History of Slavery, Law, and the Haitian Diaspora," paper presented at the 2012 *WMQ-EMSI* workshop.

²⁷ Piker, "'called by us the Acorn Whistler,'" 39 (quotations).

Jones's Popote was a "dark mulatto" woman born in Haiti who skirted the boundaries of slavery and freedom both in the Caribbean and on the North American continent.²⁸ What little we know and can consider of her life, and those of her daughter and grandson, comes largely from the legal issues surrounding her status—will contests and statutes that defined those who could be enslaved. We can reject the assertion that "biography is fiction" while acknowledging the truth of the observation that the novel "bestows" a certain "freedom . . . upon the author" that Jones the historian does not have.²⁹ Were she to write a novel about the life of Popote, she could impart a great deal about the lives of enslaved women in Popote's circumstances that would be useful to readers. If she gave sufficient detail, made the characters plausible, and perhaps included a note about evidence at the back of the book, readers would likely accept the surrounding details as historically true. Instead, the lack of definitive information leaves Jones to lament a situation "when historical work relies heavily upon phrases like 'perhaps' and 'likely' such that it approaches something like historical fiction."³⁰

Jones's frustration is understandable. As noted earlier, the historian/biographer's authoritative voice, made familiar by the many Great Man biographies, suggesting comprehensiveness, clarity, and finality, is hegemonic. It is useful to keep in mind that the possession of large amounts of information can cause problems of its own. As one who has a foot in both worlds, writing about a person who left a huge documentary trail as well as individuals who left comparatively little, there is no doubt that I wish there were more in the way of personal records from the latter group. At the same time, the tyranny of the historical record leads people to mistakenly think that all is known that can be known, and if it does not appear in a document, it is treated not just as if we lack evidence of it but as if it actually did not happen. Sally Hemings's near absence from the records of Jefferson and his family was offered as evidence that she had no connection to him.

We can, however, learn and convey important information about our subjects from the smallest details, if we find ways to work with what we have. Certainly transparency goes a long way with readers, who in most cases will understand why an enslaved woman or Native Americans on the frontier in the middle of the eighteenth century will not have extensive epistolary records or have their lives traced in other documents. A biographer who would write of these people has to make the case for why it is important for the reader to know about them and what their lives tell us about America at its beginnings. The imperfect record can still be of some use.

Asking the right questions of whatever amount of material one possesses is critical. For example, Jefferson's memorandum books contain a brief reference that he paid "Dr. Sutton for inoculating Sally." The notation was made

²⁸ Jones, "Popote," 11 (quotations).

²⁹ France and St. Clair, *Mapping Lives*, 1.

³⁰ Jones, methodology statement for "Popote," 2.

in November of 1787. Hemings was just over three months into her stay in Paris, where she had been sent to attend to Jefferson's youngest daughter, Polly, as she joined her father, who had been made the minister to France. The first question—"what was she inoculated against?"—has a fairly obvious answer given the time period. It would have to have been smallpox. The next question is "Who was Dr. Sutton?" He was a member of a famous family of smallpox inoculators who worked in the British Isles and in France. Which Sutton was it? Robert Sutton was in France during the time Hemings was there. He was what we recognize as a celebrity doctor who had been brought in to try in vain to save the French king Louis XV. How much did the inoculation cost? A lot. Jefferson paid "about forty dollars [24 livres], the equivalent of roughly one thousand dollars today." Why did it cost so much? Was it because Sutton was a celebrity? That was certainly part of it. But it also cost so much because inoculation required the patient to be housed and fed in a location away from the general population to prevent the spread of the dreaded disease. For how long was she sent away and where did she go? What was her time there like? The Suttons were known for strict adherence to what was known as their "method." Their patients were confined for forty days—that was by law—and were put on a regime of prescribed diet, medication, and exercise. The house where this occurred was located in Père-Lachaise, which is now the site of a well-known cemetery.³¹

Aside from telling us that he paid to have Hemings inoculated, Jefferson's note opened a window into a defining moment in Hemings's life. I do not have written evidence of what she felt about these events. But I know it meant something, given the contrast to the world she had lived in up until that time. Readers can know something important about Hemings from what could be considered a stray reference. There is little reason to doubt that there are similarly illuminating details in the record that Jones and Piker are combing.

Michael Oberg faced a different problem with evidence. The written information about his subject's life is tainted by the unfortunate fact that his subject was an inveterate liar. The Eleazer Williams of "The Indian Confidence-Man: Some Tentative Thoughts on Eleazer Williams, the War of 1812, and the Challenges That Come with Writing a Liar's Life Story" clearly exasperates his would-be biographer because of his apparently endless capacity for dissembling. Oberg faces a daunting task separating what was real from what was concocted in Williams's life. On the other hand, Oberg fastened onto an important detail about his subject: he was an "Indian leader who spent much of his career addressing in person and in writing powerful white men."³²

³¹ Gordon-Reed, *Heminges of Monticello*, 212–23 ("Dr. Sutton," 216, "method," 215).

³² Michael Oberg, "The Indian Confidence-Man: Some Tentative Thoughts on Eleazer Williams, the War of 1812, and the Challenges That Come with Writing a Liar's Life Story," paper presented at the 2012 WMQ-EMSI workshop, 1 n. 1.

One can say that there is no excuse for lying. But Oberg's observations invite us to think about the world from the perspective of a person part of a group struggling to maintain its place in a society transformed by European settlers. All who write about non-European peoples in early America must consider this question. To what extent should the immorality of the world imposed on people such as Williams mitigate the harsh judgment that we might make about Williams's conduct. To put it another way, how does the historian wrestle with the fallout from conquest when the conquered are required to play by the conqueror's rules? Piker's Acorn Whistler was not as extreme in his lying as Williams, but he too adopted a questionable persona, making himself into something called the "White King" in order to exercise political power at a time when European encroachment intensified the competition among Native American groups.³³ The "failures," "dishonesty," "frauds," and "faults" of Williams "haunt" Oberg.³⁴ He finds himself writing about an individual who desperately wanted to be a Great Man—he went through a period when he tried to pass himself off as the French dauphin—but was in no way equipped to play the role in the world as it existed for anyone but white men. In the end, his "act" became a matter of bare survival.

In "The Art and Science of John James Audubon: Bringing Nature to the Nation," Gregory Nobles writes that his subject's "evasive behavior invites us to consider what must be the central irony of his life: for a man who invested so much time and trouble in depicting birds so carefully and colorfully . . . he left . . . his own self-portrait remarkably sketchy and incomplete by comparison, often rendered in conflicting racial contrasts of black and white." This suggests that the famous artist and naturalist may have painted over aspects of his own life, hiding "some of his basic biographical information behind a veil of unanswered questions and even outright deception, screening some of the essential elements of his life's story from historical view."³⁵ So, was John James Audubon black or was he white? The answer to the question turns on who his mother was: a mixed-race enslaved woman or a French chambermaid.

Nobles shows that the question of Audubon's race has been important up until modern times. His chief biographers insist that he was white, likely knowing full well how differently their subject would be viewed if he were thought to be black. To many African Americans he is black, the son of a French colonial and his enslaved mistress. Once again, we confront a figure in the early American Republic who, fearing the power of the doctrine of white supremacy, may have hidden his family background to escape the

³³ Piker, "called by us the Acorn Whistler," 1.

³⁴ Oberg, "The Indian Confidence-Man," 3.

³⁵ Gregory Nobles, "The Art and Science of John James Audubon: Bringing Nature to the Nation," paper presented at the *WMQ-EMSI* workshop, 2 ("evasive behavior"), 1 ("basic biographical").

limitations that would certainly have been placed upon him were he thought to have been anything other than white. Having “black” blood would have foreclosed any possibility of enjoying the privileges accorded to white people in America. His evasions about his birthplace and origin say all that needs to be said about how important whiteness was during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for anyone who wanted to achieve and have those achievements recognized.

Suggesting that we think about the potential reasons that marginalized people violate what we might consider conventional norms is not a plea for total cultural relativity—it is not to say that the subjects in the biographies who told lies, hid truths, and invented fantastical lives for themselves should not be held to any standard. It is to suggest that Piker’s self-promoting Acorn Whistler, Oberg’s dissembling Eleazer Williams, and Nobles’s John James Audubon may have been doing, to some degree, what was necessary to survive in a world not of their own making. All of them, in one way or another, were seeking to create an identity that would take them far away from the powerlessness that would envelop them were they to accept an identity that put them at the extreme margins of life. The immorality of their actions must be weighed against the immorality of the system of white supremacy, a doctrine embedded in the fabric of American life from the very beginning.

James Sidbury and James H. Sweet take up the question of how to define identity in “African Lives, Atlantic Biography: The Individual, the Group, and Non-Western Subjectivities,” making a point that hovered over all the papers to one extent or another when they wrote that “autobiographical conventions running through Augustine and Rousseau and psychological conventions running through Locke and Freud create a default starting point for biographical writing that assumes a western subject and a specific relationship between great men and society.”³⁶ This observation resonated deeply because a majority of the papers covered the lives of individuals who were in varying degrees “non-Western”—Sidbury and Sweet’s Africans and Oberg’s, Pulsipher’s, and Piker’s Native Americans. Jones’s Popete was certainly a marginalized person in a Western society but was, in fact, of that world. The modern requirement, championed by Lytton Strachey and others, that biographers locate, explore, and explicate the inner lives of their subjects—which was not really required in the era before Freud—presents particular problems. It seems easy for an author writing what Sweet and Sidbury refer to as a “prototypical biography” with a subject on a familiar trajectory of an “educated, thrifty, God-fearing family man, inexorably moving toward greater individuality.”³⁷ But how does this template fit over the

³⁶ James Sidbury and James H. Sweet, “African Lives, Atlantic Biography: The Individual, the Group, and Non-Western Subjectivities,” paper presented at the *WMQ-EMSI* workshop, 1.

³⁷ Sidbury and Sweet, “African Lives,” 1–2 (“prototypical,” 1, “educated,” 1–2).

lives of Africans torn from their cultural moorings and Native Americans who had to negotiate a terrain increasingly dominated by a culture that demanded assimilation or annihilation?

We can start by recognizing that the narrative of the European person we already know something about may be familiar but is not necessarily the truth of his or her life. Is it possible that through determined research, a biographer could construct a more plausible life of an African or Native American than he or she could of a so-called Western person? As Jones noted during the course of the workshop, all of the non-Western people examined in the papers had significant contacts with the European world; indeed they had become a part of it. Their interactions with this world changed them and changed westerners and Western culture to make it something other than what it had been. It is those subjectivities the biographer must address. We can never totally tap into the subjectivity of another, but that does not mean the attempt should not be made to go as far as possible. In a sense, writing the life of anyone is a gamble of one form or another. The cautions voiced in the Sidbury and Sweet piece are enough to raise the issue and to remind potential biographers that their non-European subjects can see themselves in ways that do not fit the conventional Western narrative of the progress of a Great Man, or worthy individual, through life.

Finally, Rachel Hope Cleves's "Miss Bryant was the Man': A Female Husband in Early America" and Catherine O'Donnell's "A Saint, I Tell You: Elizabeth Seton's Oft-Told, Untold Life" present the stories of white women who lived outside what would be recognized as conventional norms: Charity Bryant, as what we would call today a gay woman, and Elizabeth Seton, as the first native-born American saint.³⁸ Cleves's Bryant lived with Sylvia Drake as though they were married. They were ordinary people in the sense that they neither wielded power nor set the terms of existence for others, but they would likely be extraordinary to most readers who would assume that their relationship would prompt negative, maybe even extremely hostile, reactions from their neighbors. Instead, according to Cleves, they found a measure of acceptance.

The couple's situation is one more bit of evidence of why formal law cannot be taken to describe the nature of life in a community, in much the same way that stories about interracial couples during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveal the day-to-day realities of life in small towns. Compare Bryant and Drake with Mary Hemings, an enslaved woman in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the 1790s, and the man who legally

³⁸ Rachel Hope Cleves, "Miss Bryant was the Man': A Female Husband in Early America," paper presented at the 2012 *WMQ-EMSI* workshop; Catherine O'Donnell, "A Saint, I Tell You: Elizabeth Seton's Oft-Told, Untold Life," paper presented at the 2012 *WMQ-EMSI* workshop.

owned her, Thomas Bell. Both couples' unions were outlawed. Yet the people in both communities who could have complained accepted them both. In the case of Mary Hemings, members of the community accepted her designation of herself as Mary Bell, though it was impossible for a white man and black woman to be legally married, much less an enslaved woman and her master. Bryant, Drake, Hemings, and Bell were obscure people, but their life stories speak volumes about the way both law and culture operate on the ground.

O'Donnell has no shortage of information about Seton. Her progress through life—especially her conversion to Catholicism and the founding of a religious order—show her to have been a strong-willed and ambitious woman in a time when those attributes in women were not valued. As O'Donnell suggests, this is something of a paradox. There were, she writes, “tensions between the content of [Seton’s] ambition, humble submission, and the fact that it was, nonetheless, ambition.”³⁹ As O'Donnell continues writing her book about Seton, it is very likely that this tension will reveal itself throughout.

More than any concern about evidence—she has plenty of that—O'Donnell raised questions about the narrative form of biography for all the reasons mentioned at the beginning of this piece. She wrote that there might be

[S]ets of tensions, with the narrative and its attractions at one pole and other duties at the other:

Narrative vs. need to contextualize

Narrative vs. obligation to reveal uncertainty and speculation

Narrative vs. obligation to avoid imposing subjectivity (on the helpless dead!)

Narrative vs. desire to do something more interesting—and thus professionally respectable—than simply tell the story.⁴⁰

In one way or another, the papers presented at the conference grappled with each of the issues O'Donnell identified, as they are central concerns confronting those who wish to write life stories, whether the subject is famous or obscure. Each genre of writing presents its own strengths, weaknesses, tensions, and hazards. What the papers presented at the

³⁹ O'Donnell, “A Saint, I Tell You,” 31.

⁴⁰ Catherine O'Donnell, personal communication to author, May 29, 2012.

conference and the discussions of them made clear, however, is that biography remains one of the most important ways to discover and analyze the stories of early America, and to do so in a fashion that is inclusive of all the various participants in the country's beginnings. Women, enslaved blacks, Native Americans, and working-class whites can be the "modelers" for generations who understand that there is great power in the stories of people.