

The Color of Their Skin

JEFFERSON CONSISTENTLY WROTE THAT the physical, intellectual, and even moral differences between the black and white races were fixed in nature and were, as a result, irreconcilable. He did not agree with the view, common among European authors, that color was environmental in origin and therefore modifiable. And nowhere in his discussion of blacks as blacks did Jefferson refer to what was obvious to many—that the differences between the races readily became blurred. That fact was more than obvious from the growing number of Virginians of mixed parentage and a range of physical attributes. Many of his male Virginian slave-owning relatives and neighbors took black concubines or simply forced themselves on their black slaves. Jefferson's own slave "family," as he referred to the domestic slaves at Monticello, included many of mixed race. Foremost among these was Sally Hemings, the half-sister of Jefferson's late wife (they shared the same father); she was an "octoroon"—three of her four grandparents having been white.¹ Jefferson had been conducting, as it were, his own experiments in racial mixture.

Several of the children that Sally Hemings had by Jefferson easily passed as white. But by Virginia law everyone was a slave whose mother was or had been a slave, regardless of the particular mixture of blood. Those children were still considered inferior by the man who as late as 1814 wrote of black people that (continuing the passage quoted at the end of the previous chapter) "their amalgamation with the other color produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent."² For Jefferson, clearly, the only