

Comments on The Honor of Receiving the Thomas Jefferson Award
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I feel deeply honored to receive this Thomas Jefferson Award in recognition of work that has helped to advance Jefferson's ideals. There are always many people who deserve such awards, so I thank Vin Steponaitis and others who put me forward for this honor. I also thank Chancellor Guskiewicz for presenting this award and for his continuing leadership and vision for our university in these challenging times. I want to thank Mimi Chapman for her outstanding leadership of faculty governance; and I thank my hardworking colleagues in the History Department for giving me a wonderful intellectual community over the last 35 years.

The Jefferson Award becomes an especially significant honor when I look at the list of past UNC faculty members who have received this Award since 1962. This list includes many colleagues I've known and respected; and their values and service have made lasting contributions to UNC. But they represent only a very small part of the community that has worked to advance Jefferson's ideals over the past sixty years—and long before.

We know that Jefferson has become one of America's most controversial Founding Fathers in recent decades as we have come to understand much more about his personal life, his control of the enslaved people who worked at Monticello, and his relationship with Sally Hemings. Jefferson's racism and his actions that denied enslaved people the basic rights he famously proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence have made him a problematic figure. He never adhered to his belief in human rights by trying to abolish slavery.

We're now discussing the future of the Jefferson Award at UNC, and today's Jefferson event comes at a transitional time in our own University's reckoning with its role in the history of racism within and beyond North Carolina. I therefore want to note the publication this month of an important new book by Geeta Kapur entitled *To Drink From the Well: The Struggle for Racial Equity at the Nation's Oldest Public University*.

History is always complicated, and it rarely gives us exactly what we want. So I would like to accept this Award by emphasizing Jefferson's ideals rather than his contradictions and flaws. Engaging with Jefferson requires an acceptance of historical and human ambiguities and an ability to see both the good and bad in other people. This is one of the outcomes of a good education: the ability to live with and explore the ambiguities and contradictions that exist in all human beings.

What, then, are the "Jefferson ideals" that I've tried to affirm at UNC as I've worked with all of the great colleagues who have sustained and strengthened this valuable academic community? I want to emphasize the three themes on Jefferson's famous tombstone in Virginia: "*Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, Author of the Declaration of Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom and Father of the University of Virginia.*"

This tombstone list actually refers to what I see as the mission of a great university: We have the task of promoting the best possible education, promoting the freest possible expression of ideas, knowledge and ethical commitments, and promoting the human rights and institutions that build a foundation for democratic societies. In other words, our work is linked to Jefferson's ideal goals of expanding knowledge, tolerating diverse ideas, and creating a free, democratic society.

Like Jefferson, most of us violate or fall short of our ideals, but I want to stress the enduring power of Jeffersonian ideas by referring briefly to the abolitionist writer David Walker (1785-1830). Walker was an African American man whose mother was a free woman, so he grew up as a free child in Wilmington, North Carolina before moving to Boston for a safer, freer life. In 1829 he published an early Abolitionist book entitled *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. This short book described the systemic racism in American politics, education, religion, and commerce; and it called on enslaved people to honor the ideals of America's own Declaration of Independence by rising up against slavery.

When the book began to circulate in North Carolina, the state legislature immediately passed laws that criminalized the distribution of "seditious" abolitionist texts and banned the teaching of enslaved people to read and write. Walker never returned to North Carolina; and no teacher or student could legally distribute abolitionist writings in our state's schools or universities before the Civil War. This response might be compared to the current legislature's law that seeks to ban the teaching of Critical Race Theory in North Carolina's schools. Meanwhile, critics of the "1619 Project" are now denouncing Nikole Hannah-Jones with a kind of white anger and fear that drove the denunciation of David Walker's book in 1830.

There is also another UNC link to David Walker because the first modern edition of his book was edited and published in 1965 by an historian named Herbert Aptheker. Aptheker was invited to speak at UNC in March 1966, but he was a Marxist historian who was banned from giving a campus talk because of the Speaker Ban Law. He tried (but failed) to discuss the history of racism at the Silent Sam monument. There is thus a long historical arc that connects David Walker to our university's struggle to achieve the Jeffersonian ideal of allowing the free circulation of ideas—a struggle that continued in the era of the Speaker Ban and (most recently) in the campaign to grant tenure for Nikole Hannah-Jones.

David Walker also has a close connection with Thomas Jefferson, because he shows us how to engage with Jefferson's ideals while also condemning Jefferson's racism and slaveholding. Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* was a kind of long dialogue with Jefferson's main ideas, which Walker used to attack slavery and systemic racism. So I want to conclude my remarks about the meaning of the Jefferson Award with the help of several comments by David Walker. No UNC professor could ask students to buy or read Walker's book before the Civil War, but I want to affirm our links to the past, to David Walker, and to Thomas Jefferson by quoting a text that was once banned at our University.

The early sections of Walker's *Appeal* introduced a vehement critique of Thomas Jefferson's racism and condemned his influence on white American culture. Walker emphasized that Jefferson's philosophical and political stature gave white Americans an argument for systemic racism; and he strongly denounced this racism—as we must denounce it today.

Walker on Jefferson's Racism

“Mr. Jefferson declared to the world, that we are inferior to the whites, both in the endowments of our bodies and of minds. It is indeed surprising, that a man of such great learning, combined with such excellent natural parts, should speak so of a set of men in chains.... Mr. Jefferson... has in truth injured us more, and has been as great a barrier to our emancipation as any thing that has ever been advanced against us. I hope you will not let it pass unnoticed.”

But after making this powerful critique, Walker moved on in the remaining sections of the book to use the ideals that we see on Jefferson's tombstone as themes for his attack on the systemic racism of slavery. The text proceeded in the reverse order of Jefferson's tombstone list, but the arguments of the *Appeal* affirmed each of the key ideas.

First, Walker demanded that black Americans should have access to education, and he insisted that education offered the pathway out of the “ignorance” that kept enslaved people from breaking their chains.

Walker on Education as a Foundation for Human Freedom

“I call upon you therefore to cast your eyes upon the wretchedness of your brethren, to do your utmost to enlighten them—go to work and enlighten your brethren!”

I pray that the Lord may undeceive my ignorant brethren, and permit them to... seek after the substance of learning.... For coloured people to acquire learning in this country, makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation. Why, what is the matter? Why, they know that their infernal deeds of cruelty will be made known to the world... The bare name of educating the coloured people, scares our cruel oppressors almost to death.”

Walker then moved to the issue of religious freedom and condemned white churches for condoning slavery and white vigilantes for denying the rights of religious freedom to enslaved people. He insisted that all people must have the right to pursue their own ideas and religious beliefs and thus expanded on Jefferson's call for religious tolerance.

Walker on The Right to the Free Practice of Religion

“I have known small collections of coloured people to have convened together, for no other purpose than to worship God Almighty, in spirit and in truth, to the best of their knowledge; when tyrants... would also convene and wait almost in breathless silence for the poor coloured people to commence singing and praying to the Lord our God, as soon as they had commenced, the wretches would burst in upon them and drag them out and commence beating them.... They hinder us from going to hear the word of God—they keep us sunk in ignorance, and will not let us learn to read the word of God, nor write—If they find us with a book of any description in our hand, they will beat us nearly to death—they are so afraid we will learn to read, and enlighten our dark and benighted minds—They will not suffer us to meet together to worship the God who made us.”

Finally, Walker ended the book by quoting most of the Declaration of Independence and claiming that the message of equal human rights in that Declaration provided the basis for the revolutionary overthrow of slavery in America.

Walker on The Declaration of Independence, Human Rights, and Democracy

“We hold these truths to be self evident—that ALL men are created EQUAL!! That they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

“Compare your own language..., extracted from your Declaration of Independence, with your cruelties and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers and yourselves on our fathers and on us—men who have never given your fathers or you the least provocation!!!... Now, Americans! I ask you candidly, was your suffering under Great Britain, one hundredth part as cruel and tyrannical as you have rendered ours under you?”

I could say much more about how David Walker condemned Jefferson’s racism and then drew on Jefferson’s ideals to construct his argument for the abolition of slavery. But I hope that in linking Walker’s abolitionist text to both his critique of Jefferson and his use of Jefferson’s main ideas I’ve shown why I see these ideas as essential to our work at UNC. In addition to reading authors such as David Walker and Nikole Hannah-Jones, we are still trying to advance the Jeffersonian belief that knowledge and education are essential for an enlightened society, that the tolerance of diverse ideas and cultural traditions is essential for a free community, and that equal human rights are essential for a democratic political culture.

Despite Jefferson’s obvious and deeply disturbing racist flaws, I believe we have to think *with* Jefferson’s other ideas while we also think *against* his racism; and I believe that acceptance of the Jefferson Award also requires an acceptance of the ambiguity and complexity that are at the center of both history and a liberal arts education.

I therefore appreciate this recognition of my contributions to UNC work that exemplifies Jefferson’s ideals, and I want to link our own engagement with these ideals to people such as David Walker who also drew on these ideals in their struggles for education, freedom, and democracy during past centuries. I also appreciate all of the ways in which faculty and students have worked to advance these ideals while I’ve been at UNC.

I know that no matter how the “Jefferson Award” may evolve, future professors and students will continue to defend and affirm these ideals in new ways as they move into the dynamic, always-changing life of this vibrant University. I believe our faculty reaffirmed these ideas in the campaign to bring Nikole Hannah-Jones to UNC, and we will continue to promote a Jeffersonian mission by expanding knowledge, fostering diverse ideas, and defending democracy.