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"In My Own Hand Writing": Benjamin Banneker Addresses the Slaveholder of Monticello

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Rhetoric & Public Affairs

Michigan State University Press

Volume 1, Number 3, Fall 1998

pp. 387-405

10.1353/rap.2010.0097

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

"In My Own Hand Writing": Benjamin Banneker Addresses the Slaveholder of Monticello Angela G. Ray On August 19, 1791, Benjamin Banneker wrote a letter to the forty-eight-year-old U.S. secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson. Banneker was a fifty-nine-year-old free black man and a self-taught astronomer living in Baltimore County, Maryland. He had prepared an almanac for the year 1792, and he enclosed a copy of the manuscript for this almanac with his letter to Jefferson. Claiming that he simply intended to direct to Jefferson, "as a present, a copy of an Almanack which I have calculated for the Succeeding year," Banneker wrote that his "Sympathy and affection for [his] brethren" led him "unexpectedly and unavoidably" to take the opportunity to condemn endemic prejudice and the "groaning captivity and cruel oppression" of slavery.¹ Justifying his

right to speak to the secretary of state on such a topic, Banneker argued from moral compulsion based on recognition of deep injustice. He spoke not as a representative slave but as a more fortunate "brother" of slaves, obliged to use his abilities to advance the cause of others of his race.² Emphasizing the discrepancy between the rhetoric of equality found in the Declaration of Independence and the physical fact of slavery, Banneker denounced the institution that he called "that State of tyrannical thralldom, and inhuman captivity." Banneker's letter to Jefferson has acquired a near-mythic status in U.S. and particularly African American history. Published as a pamphlet, along with Jefferson's reply, in 1792, the letter began a new life as a public antislavery tract soon after its initial composition. Periodicals such as the *Universal Asylum* and *Columbian Magazine*, the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* reprinted the letter through the mid-nineteenth century.³ Banneker's life also offered evidence of the intellectual potential of African Americans. Frederick Douglass encouraged the publication of an autobiography of Banneker in the 1880s, writing that "my newly emancipated people... are especially in need of just such examples of mental industry and success as I believe the life of Banneker furnish."⁴ Eighty years later, as the mid-twentieth-century U.S. civil rights Angela G. Ray is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Speech-Communication at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She would like to thank Kirt H. Wilson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell for their invaluable assistance in the revision of this essay. © Rhetoric & Public Affairs Vol. 1, No. 3, 1998, pp. 387-405 ISSN 1094-8392 388 Rhetoric & Public Affairs movement unfolded, historian Lerone Bennett Jr. printed the Banneker-Jefferson letters in *Ebony*. Bennett remarked on the potential of Banneker's life to inspire social action: "For men who appeal from the gutters to the stars, for men who stand up and protest, no matter what the odds, the star-gazer remains a persuasive and articulate example."⁵ In 1980 the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp commemorating Banneker in the Black Heritage U.S.A. series. Since the early 1980s U.S. publishers have released a number of children's books about Banneker, focusing primarily on his contributions as an African American scientist and mathematician. These books often identify him as a "black hero," a "black achiever," or a "black American pioneer of discovery." Furthermore, the University of Maryland at College Park funds a Benjamin Banneker Scholarship Program for African American college students. The story of Banneker's life has continued to provide evidence of "mental industry and success" as well as courage in articulating protest. None the less, Banneker's value as a symbol of black achievement and pioneering antislavery advocacy has not translated into sustained scholarly efforts to engage critically his life and work. The first book-length biography, Martha Tyson's *Banneker, the Afric-American Astronomer*, was published in 1884. Based on original materials, it seems factually trustworthy, although the book is clearly meant as an encomium. (Tyson's father was Banneker's friend George Ellicott, a member of a white Quaker family who moved into Banneker's Maryland locale in 1772 and operated a mill and a store.)⁶ The biography offers anecdotal material about...

"IN MY OWN HAND WRITING": BENJAMIN BANNEKER ADDRESSES THE SLAVEHOLDER OF MONTICELLO

ANGELA G. RAY

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Angela G. Ray is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Maryland in Annapolis, Maryland. She would like to thank Kurt W. Tiller and Karlyn Kokes Campbell for their invaluable assistance in the revision of this essay.

© Roberts & Public Affairs
Vol. 1, No. 2, 1998, pp. 357-385
ISSN 1104-4392



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