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The Jefferson Files

Through the explicit transformation in tone from relatively respectful to accusatory, Banneker strategically shifts his diction, appeals, and allusions to accentuate the hypocrisy of slavery, thereby urging Jefferson and others in power to change their stance on American slavery.

In the first portion of his letter, Banneker constructs a narrative to build empathy through the use of distinct allusions and appeals to a shared experience. For example, throughout lines 1 to 25, Banneker employs strictly formal and respectful diction, showcased through the repetition of “sir” and praises of Jefferson’s past works. Banneker also references Jefferson’s “miraculous and providential preservation” of “freedom and tranquility,” attempting to use flowery language to garner Jefferson’s support. Further, Banneker directly quotes the “Declaration of Independence,” a document that established the liberties and rights of American citizens in response to the “tyranny of the British Crown.” By alluding specifically to this central dogma—which Jefferson was integral in composing—Banneker explicitly asserts the significance of Jefferson’s prior work, mentioning its worthiness “to be recorded and remembered in all succeeding ages.” However, despite this ostensible commendation of the doctrine, Banneker cites Jefferson’s words in the Declaration of Independence to later deconstruct the hypocrisy associated with its constraints. Finally, Banneker appeals to pathos, or a common experience, between himself and Jefferson by referencing the United States’ “State of Servitude” under the “tyranny of the British Crown.” He commends Jefferson’s “powerful effort” in combatting this

injustice, thereby drawing a parallel to African Americans' "state of slavery" at this time. By accentuating this shared state of oppression, Banneker intends to build Jefferson's empathy and subvert his expectations. This repeated praise and appeal to empathy establishes Jefferson's ability to induce change in the United States at the time, which, from lines 26 to 54, eventually builds to disappointment when Jefferson fails to uphold his own principles when dealing with African American slavery.

After establishing an empathetic and admiring tone in the first half of the letter, Banneker transitions to a more direct call to action, utilizing distinct word choice and allusions in order to appeal to ethos. Banneker's once approving and respectful diction abruptly adopts a negative connotation. The description of slavery as "groaning captivity and cruel oppression" paints a vivid picture of the horrors of slavery and satirizes his once-respectful statements. He appeals to ethos by stating that "God" distributed rights to all humans and that Jefferson and the others in power are going against the will of an almighty being by oppressing African American people. This appeal emphasizes Jefferson's and the United States' hypocrisy by using the authority of God to substantiate Banneker's argument. At the end of this section, Banneker makes an allusion to the Bible, more specifically the story of Job, "a righteous man who endures much suffering." This allusion serves to summon Jefferson to be empathetic to African Americans and their oppression, explicitly highlighting the hypocrisy in his words. The condescending tone of this reference constructs Jefferson as ignorant and blind to prejudice. Banneker also uses this allusion to the Bible as an appeal to ethos by using the authority of his and Jefferson's shared religious text to prove the validity of his argument. Banneker's harsh juxtapositions and unambiguity when exposing hypocrisy intensify these claims. By logically using Jefferson's own experiences

and words as ammunition, Banneker deconstructs the contradictions between the United States' alleged ideals for liberty and the reality of the African American experience at this time.