

INSTRUMENTAL AND CONSTITUTIVE RHETORIC IN MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S "LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL"

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Traditional conceptions of rhetorical ethos treat character exclusively as an instrument of persuasion, but the persona of the rhetor often functions as a means of constituting the self in relation to a complex network of social and cultural relationships. This generative function of character becomes especially important in cases where suppressed groups attempt to find rhetorical means to alter their circumstances. Using Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" as a case study, we argue that the text develops a complex and nuanced construction of King's character. This construct allows King to criticize his target audience without alienating himself from it and also allows the "eavesdropping" black audience to discover a model for reconstructing their own sense of agency. This constitutive dimension of character occurs simultaneously and in intimate connection with its use as an instrument of persuasion concerning specific issues. Based on this case, we argue that rigid distinctions between instrumental and constitutive functions of rhetoric are misleading and that rhetorical critics should regard the constitution of self and the instrumental uses of character as a fluid relationship.

Almost 30 years ago, in an essay devoted to the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Thomas W. Benson commented that rhetoric is, among other things, a way of constituting the self within a scene composed of "exigencies, constraints, others and the self," and it is also a resource for "exercising control over self, others, and by extension the scene."¹ Thus Benson assigns rhetoric a dual function. It is simultaneously generative and instrumental, because it helps to constitute the identity of self, other, and scene, while it also pulls these identities within the orbit of situated interests. Moreover, once this duality is acknowledged, it virtually forces the critic to expand and complicate the conventional interest in "ethical proof," because the persona of the rhetor emerges not just as an instrument of persuasion but also as something constituted within the rhetorical medium.

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Viewed from our current vantage point, Benson's observations seem prescient. He anticipates a set of pivotal issues associated with recent interest in constitutive rhetoric and with the emergence of "interpretive" or "conceptual" criticism.² He also locates a subject—Malcolm X in particular and African American protest rhetoric in general—where these problems arise with special clarity and urgency. In Malcolm's texts, we encounter a persona that, as Benson says, sometimes takes on the aspect of "a magnificent anti-hero, an existentialist saint, or a mythic witness to America's oppressive racism," but that also sometimes seems to display the qualities of a hustler, an opportunist, or a cynical manipulator of words and audiences.³ Thus, a tension between the constitutive and instrumental functions surfaces almost immediately when examining Malcolm's rhetoric, and although it is generally less obtrusive in other African American rhetors during the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, it is still a prominent feature of their discourse—and for good reason. Their efforts to overcome a system that repressed and demeaned them required rhetorical instruments sufficient not only to serve immediate political ends but also to constitute a new conception of themselves and their fellow African Americans.

In this essay, we concentrate upon Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and argue that it displays a subtle and complex interrelationship between construction of self and instrumental appeals through character. On our reading of the text, the "Letter" harmonizes aspects of its author's persona by blending and balancing the representation of the self in relation to what Benson calls "the exigencies, constraints, and others" connected with the scene. King's effort to move through a tangle of events and ideas toward a decorous sense of order contrasts notably with the confrontational rhetoric of Malcolm X,⁴ but we hope to demonstrate that in constructing an effective persona, King shares the burden and opportunity of crossing between instrumental and constitutive concerns. Before turning to the text of the "Letter," however, we need to consider the context in which it appeared and some of the circumstances of its composition.

1. THE BACKGROUND

Early in 1963, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) targeted Birmingham, Alabama, for a nonviolent direct action campaign designed to force the city to modify or eliminate its segregation laws. For a variety of reasons, the campaign was delayed until April 3, and when it did begin, it encountered serious problems. Only a handful of protestors proved willing to subject themselves to arrest, and so the effort to force concessions by filling the city's jails was failing. Moreover, white moderates, and even some blacks, thought the campaign ill timed, since the newly elected city government had been given no opportunity to deal with the segregation issue. Worse yet, the city's attorneys obtained a federal injunction

forbidding King and other SCLC leaders from sponsoring, encouraging, or participating in a demonstration unless they obtained a permit from the city. In effect, this meant that SCLC either had to abandon the campaign or violate federal court orders.

King decided that it was necessary to violate the injunction and that he himself would lead a march and submit to arrest. This "faith act," he hoped, would invigorate the campaign, and on April 12, 1963 (Good Friday, a day chosen for its symbolic importance), King headed a protest demonstration through the streets of Birmingham and was arrested. Refusing to post bail until April 19, he remained in jail for eight days.⁵

On the morning of the 13th, the day after King was imprisoned, the *Birmingham News* printed a short open letter signed by eight local clergymen. The clergy criticized the direct action campaign as an untimely and unwise effort "led in part by outsiders" and urged the black residents of Birmingham to obey the law, withdraw support from the demonstrations, and resolve their grievances through the courts and the negotiation process.⁶ King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was a direct response to the clergymen's statement.

The history of the "Letter"'s composition is a matter of some interest. According to the conventional story, King began writing his response on the margins of the newspaper that published the clergymen's letter, then on odd scraps of paper provided by a sympathetic prison guard, and finally on a legal tablet provided by King's attorney. While King was engaged in composition, his visitors carried the marginalia, scraps, and pages to SCLC headquarters where a secretary typed the individual bits until the text was completed.

There is no reason to doubt the truth of this story as far as it goes, but it does not seem to be the whole story. Although the "Letter" is dated April 16th, no version of it circulated in public until after the first week of May, and internal evidence rather clearly indicates that the published version of the work could not have been completed until after April 19. Thus, at least some parts of the "Letter" likely were composed and/or revised after King left prison.⁷ The tone and content of the document, however, create the impression that the author wrote it from within a prison cell, and as we will note later, this impression greatly contributes to King's self-representation and to the persuasive impact of the "Letter" as a whole.

2. KING'S "LETTER": THE RHETORIC OF THE TEXT

With this background in mind, we can turn to the text itself and to the construction and representation of agency within it. This interpretative inquiry has an affinity with the neoclassical concern for the rhetor's ethos, but in the neoclassical approach, the tendency is to designate character as a mode of proof, to locate instances where it is invoked, and to isolate it as a discrete element in the persuasive

process. In the interpretative frame, the agency of the rhetor refers not just to the use of character appeals but also to the way that rhetors place themselves within a network of communicative relationships. At minimum, the explication of this process demands attention to: (1) the rhetor's construction of self, (2) the rhetor's construction of the audience (what Edwin Black calls the "second persona"),⁸ and (3) the enactment within the text of the relationship between rhetor and audience. In what follows, we will try to explain how King's "Letter" works along all three of these lines and to indicate how they converge to create and represent an identity for King both as writer and as social/political actor.

One of the most prominent features of the text is its extensive use of direct address. Whereas the clergymen's letter is addressed to no one in particular, King begins with the salutation "My Dear Fellow Clergymen," and the first paragraph continues in this vein as King's "I" speaks in response to the "you" who composed the earlier letter. And the dialogic relationship is underscored by the wording of the paragraph's final sentence: "But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms."⁹ This pattern is sustained through the body of the "Letter" as King organizes its content into a seriatim response to claims attributed to the eight clergymen. The following schema indicates this structure:

- A. Introduction
- B. Refutation
 - 1. That King is an outsider
 - 2. That King and his supporters should negotiate rather than demonstrate
 - 3. That the demonstrations are ill timed
(First confession: King's disappointment with white moderates)
 - 4. That nonviolent direct action precipitates violence
 - 5. That racial problems will resolve themselves over time
 - 6. That King and his supporters are extremists
(Second confession: King's disappointment with white clergy)
 - 7. That the Birmingham police deserve praise
- C. Conclusion

Save for the fifth point on the list, King introduces every one of his refutations with the use of the second-person pronoun, and most often he fashions a direct response in the first person. (For example, discussion of the second claim begins: "You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being" [85].) At times, King enhances this interactive sensibility by means of rhetorical questions. (For example, "You may well ask:

'Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn't negotiation a better path?' You are exactly right in your call for negotiation" [86].) In short, King exploits the form of the "Letter" to localize, personalize, and dramatize the issues in the civil rights debate.

Although King's "Letter" literally and directly addressed the eight Birmingham clergymen, it was never delivered to them, nor were they, in fact, his intended audience. The clergymen functioned rhetorically as a synecdoche, as a representation of the larger audience King wanted to reach, and his decision to respond to their statement and his manner of doing so were both strategic. The success of the Birmingham campaign, and of SCLC efforts in general, depended heavily on support from white moderates—Americans already inclined to oppose racial segregation in principle and to feel uncomfortable about the discrepancy between their basic values and the discriminatory policies then practiced in the South, but who were also fearful about direct action campaigns and the threat they posed to public order. When the eight clergymen published their statement, they offered King an opportunity to embody this target audience (and hence to use it as a rhetorical construct) without appearing to manufacture an artificial situation. Equally important, as Richard P. Fulkerson has noted, the invocation of specific individuals as an ostensible audience allowed King to cultivate a personal tone and to project his personality in ways that would have been impossible in a document addressed to no one in particular.¹⁰ The "Letter," then, effectively used an actual event to construct a personalized version of both writer and audience through a double synecdoche. Just as the eight clergy stood for white moderates, so also did King stand for the SCLC and the African Americans engaged in nonviolent direct action campaigns.

While the "Letter"'s external structure proceeds in a point-by-point linear order, the rhetoric of the text also develops recurrent themes—repeated ideas, images, and arguments that work through the linear sequence of refutational arguments. These themes represent King as an agent of change who embodies the basic values of his white moderate audience and who acts with restraint and respect even as he attempts to reform glaring injustices. This development, an example of what Kenneth Burke calls repetitive form,¹¹ allows King to disagree with his audience while still remaining consubstantial with it. His dissent thereby seems to arise from within the *habitus* of his interlocutors.

From the opening salutation, King repeatedly emphasizes his status as a Christian minister and his unwavering commitment to the church. This point achieves its most notable articulation in the course of King's "second confession," where he expresses disappointment with white clergymen who "remain silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows," and with white churches that stand on the sideline and preach an otherworldly religion. This is strong criticism, but King explains that it comes from a person firmly embedded in the Christian tradition: "In deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity of the

church. Be assured that my tears have been tears of love . . . Yes, I love the church; I love her sacred walls. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson, and great-grandson of preachers” (97). Here King’s figuration overlaps at three levels of embodiment: Christianity is made physical through representation of the church as a walled, physical space; King, coming from a lineage domiciled within those walls, assumes an identity connected with that Christian space, and from this inside position his disappointment with the church can manifest itself only as tears of love. All this figurative work presents King as someone who has the appropriate credentials to criticize the church from within and to recall it to its own ideals.

More generally, King embodies his solidarity with mainstream American values through the use of appeals to authority. The text is peppered with references to venerated figures from American history, Judeo-Christian lore, and the Western intellectual tradition. These include Paul, Socrates, Reinhold Niebuhr, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Jesus, Amos, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and T. S. Eliot, and King invokes these references to vindicate and explain his own actions. For example, in response to the charge that he is “an outsider,” King cites scriptural precedent for his activity: “Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth-century prophets left their little villages and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown” (84–85).

King is obviously concerned to dispel the perception that he is an outsider in Birmingham and a radical who adheres to positions that fall outside the orbit of respectable American opinion. The appeals to authority counter this image at two levels. First, by citing icons of accepted belief and faith, King associates himself with figures who command unquestioned respect from his target audience, and this helps to establish commonality with it. Second, the words and deeds of these respected individuals, insofar as they appear to be the same as or similar to King’s words and deeds, become exemplars that sanction King’s position and open space for it within the conceptual horizons of his audience. If Amos, Paul, Socrates, and even Jesus behaved as agitators, then it follows that agitation to expose and overcome injustice is no threat to the common tradition, but is instead something needed to renew and sustain its integrity.

King not only constructs his persona through strategies of embodiment, but he also uses the text to enact the kind of agency that he wants to have associated with himself and his movement. By enactment, we are referring not just to what the text says, but to what it does, and throughout the “Letter” King’s verbal action as writer and advocate presents a complex but consistent representation of his character. The

manner of his argument and his style of arguing combine to depict the man as energetic, active, committed to principles, and committed to act in accordance with those principles but to do so in a poised, balanced, reasonable, and restrained manner. The dominant image is one of restrained energy, and this image is well calculated to diffuse the accusation that King is a dangerous radical who lacks prudent judgment and acts without due regard for practical consequence.

Throughout the sequence of refutations, the text enacts balanced judgment through what Fulkerson calls a "dual pattern."¹² King responds to the allegations against him first on an immediate practical level and then on the level of principle, and as this pattern unfolds, the reader witnesses King exercising the kind of judgment most appropriate to deliberation—judgment that simultaneously encompasses particulars and principles and that engages questions both of expediency and honor. The first of King's refutations provides a clear illustration of this strategy. In responding to the charge that he is an "outsider," King begins by explaining that the Birmingham affiliate of the SCLC asked for his assistance, and so he is "here, along with several members of my staff, because we were invited here." But this is not the end of the matter, since beyond such particular concerns there is also a moral imperative that leads King to confront injustice just as the Hebrew prophets and the apostle Paul did. And, to place the issue on an even broader ground, King recognizes "the interrelatedness of all countries and states. . . . Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly" (85). Thus, whether judgment rests on the concrete particulars of the case or on sweeping ethical principle, King should not be regarded as an outsider; his presence in Birmingham is both appropriate and right.

The second, third, and fourth refutational sections also employ this double structure, but it is in the sixth section, where King addresses the charge of extremism, that the technique achieves its most powerful articulation. He begins his response by expressing surprise that anyone would label him as an extremist, since in actuality he stands "in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community." On one side, there are those who simply acquiesce to injustice and do nothing, and on the other there are the black nationalists who react to injustice with hatred and bitterness and come "perilously close to advocating violence." Between these extremes of complacency and angry despair, King offers the "more excellent way" of nonviolent protest, and he acknowledges disappointment that this position would be regarded as extremist. King, however, has a second thought on the matter, and he "gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love—'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.'" This appeal to authority continues through a long list of heroic figures (including Amos, Paul, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson) who are also linked to famous

quotations expressing extreme ideas. And King concludes that the question is not whether “we will be extremists” but whether we will be extremists for love and justice or extremists for hate and injustice (92–94).

As other commentators have noted, this passage distinguishes between extremism understood as placement along a spectrum of existing positions and extremism understood in terms of intensity of conviction.¹³ By the first standard, King is not an extremist but rather a dialectically tempered moderate, since his position comes between and constructively synthesizes the antithetical forces of apathy and violence. By the second standard, however, King is an extremist because he is passionately committed in principle to act against and eradicate injustice, and as King’s historical witnesses demonstrate, extremism of this type supports the fundamental values of the society. This passage, then, combines restrained practical judgment with a passionate determination to overcome injustice, and the passion, however strongly it is expressed, still moves along constructive lines, because faith, justice, and love channel its energy.

Another notable feature of this passage is King’s restraint in choosing the words he uses to address his critics. When labeled as an extremist, King reacts not with an expression of anger or indignity but disappointment. This sort of verbal control recurs throughout the “Letter.” Thus, in the two sections that digress from the sequence of refutations, King makes his most critical comments about the inaction of the white community, but he studiously avoids the language of accusation. Instead, he “confesses” his disappointment with them. This restraint not only characterizes King’s choice of words, but also, and more powerfully, it is enacted in the structure of some of his sentences.

In one of the most memorable parts of the text, King offers a carefully modulated response to the charge that the demonstrations are untimely. African Americans, he reminds his readers, already have had to wait for 340 years for their rights, and it is no wonder that they are growing impatient. “Perhaps it easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, ‘Wait’”:

But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing bitterness toward white people; when you have to

concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country trip and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger" and your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs.," when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of nobodiness; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. (88–89)

The most obviously remarkable feature of this sentence is its length—331 words, which makes it by far the longest sentence in the text and probably one of the longest sentences in contemporary English prose. But the syntax of the sentence also deserves attention. Because it is structured in left-branching or periodic form, the syntactic complexity of the sentence develops through the accretion of dependent clauses that occur before the main clause. This arrangement suspends the completion of the sentence as a meaningful unit until the end, and so, to understand the sentence, the reader must wait until the final 11 words provide closure. Moreover, since the dependent clauses narrate a series of injuries, insults, and outrages, the whole development iconically represents the plight of the African American.¹⁴ The white readers, who have never directly suffered from the "stinging darts of segregation," must wait while this long list of grievances continues to assault their sensibilities, and so they vicariously experience the frustration of the African American. The sentence enacts and transmits that experience in a way that no propositional argument could accomplish.

Given the length of the sentence, the tension that mounts through it, and the vivacity with which it represents the effects of injustice, we might expect it to end on a strong note of outrage and anger, perhaps even with an accusation against those who ask African Americans to wait. Instead, however, the climax comes in the form of an understated address to the white audience: "Then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait." The understatement may work to heighten the emotional impact of the sentence, but it is also a striking enactment of King's restraint, and it is difficult to imagine a more appropriate textual representation of King's pledge to proceed in reasonable and patient terms.

Toward the end of the "Letter," when he questions the clergyman's praise of the police, King uses this same verbal technique for building and containing emotional energy:

I don't believe that you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its angry violent dogs literally biting six unarmed Negroes. I don't believe you would so quickly commend the policemen if you would observe their ugly inhuman treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you would watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you would see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys; if you will observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we want to sing our grace together. I'm sorry that I can't join you in your praise for the police department. (98–99)

The loose or right branching construction of the long sentence does not suspend meaning as does the periodic sentence King uses earlier, and partially for this reason, this passage does not have quite the same dramatic impact. Nevertheless, the pattern of energy and restraint is apparent. The long sentence accumulates grievances through its many clauses, and the short sentence that follows offers a controlled, understated response addressed directly to the ostensible audience.

To sum up, in the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” King attempts to reach his target audience by dispelling the perception that he is a radical given to intemperate action and committed to views that fall outside the mainstream of American society. The text consistently works to represent King in a different light, and it does so not just by direct statement, but also by demonstrating balanced, temperate forms of judgment as it engages key issues and by the enactment of restrained energy in the very structure of the prose. At the end of the “Letter,” King articulates this theme in two nicely balanced sentences that sum up the position he occupies throughout the text:

If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth and is indicative of unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything in this letter that is an understatement of the truth and is indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient with anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me. (100)

3. PERSONA AND AUDIENCE IN KING'S “LETTER”

Readers of the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” often testify to its powerfully evocative effect. For many Americans, the “Letter” produced an immediate, unified response that restructured and reframed their perception of a complex situation, and E. Culpepper Clark has offered a plausible account for this response. King, he maintains, gathered together an ambiguous set of cultural experiences and expectations and transformed them “into the controlling metaphor for interpreting non-violent civil disobedience.” Writing from the confinement in a prison, King could exercise a prophetic voice that recalled his people to their better selves and that resonated “with the Judeo-Christian struggle against human bondage.”¹⁵

King's actual imprisonment in Birmingham Jail is a necessary condition for the metaphor to work, but the image of a man writing in a cramped, isolated prison cell is in large part constructed by the text itself. And it was not enough simply for King to construct a prisoner's voice, since not all prisoners are prophets. King also faced the more difficult task of embedding himself within a culture that segregated people of his race. The prophetic voice does not come from the outside; it must arise from within the people whom it criticizes. It must incarnate what is highest and best in the culture of that people and summon them to act on standards the prophet embodies and the audience shares.¹⁶ The prophet is a member of the tribe, and so, to be a prophet among the Hebrews, one must be a Hebrew. And what is required to be a prophet among white Americans? That is a role King neither inherits by birth nor gains through any other easy access. He must argue himself into it, and the "Letter" is wonderfully designed to achieve just this purpose. It constructs King as an agent who grounds his identity in the religious, intellectual, and political values of the American tribe, and it enacts a form of agency that sustains connection between author and reader even in the presence of disagreement. King emerges from the "Letter" not just as someone who can argue with a white audience on its own terms but as an agent who can elevate that audience by forcing it to acknowledge its sins of omission and by demanding consistency between its actions and its highest values.

To this point, our reading of the text has followed the writer-audience ratio that is central to its explicit argument. But while the white moderate surely is the ostensible target audience, King must have known that the text would also circulate among African American readers. A systematic study of the coexistence of this black audience requires more attention than we can give to it in this essay, but we can offer a sketch of how shifting focus to the text's other audience enhances our understanding of the constitutive function of rhetoric.

The black audience for King's "Letter" has a status similar to what James L. Golden and Richard D. Rieke call the eavesdropping audience for the rhetoric of Malcolm X and other militant African American rhetors. While these militants usually speak directly and specifically to a black audience, they are also quite aware of white "eavesdroppers" who are listening even though they are not addressed, and it seems clear that their discourse is intended to have an impact on the whites who "overhear" what is said. This concern about the eavesdropping audience, Golden and Rieke argue, arises from its association with the existing power structure, and so the eavesdropping audience is constructed as an effort to induce people in power to effect change.¹⁷

As we have shown, King's commitment to writing himself inside the values of mainstream American society enables him to make a direct appeal to the audience of white moderates, but it is the black readers of the text who must be persuaded to risk their bodies. Without their active involvement, nonviolent civil disobedience

cannot work, since blacks must exercise their power to protest if they are to force whites to align their professed beliefs with their actions. Thus, even though King places the white audience at the center of his text, his effort to persuade it results from and consequently is constrained by black action. By analogy to the white eavesdroppers on the rhetoric of Malcolm and other militant blacks, we can think of black readers of King's "Letter" as eavesdroppers who are being urged to exercise power to effect change. In this case, the black audience is instructed about how to adopt personae that will make them more effective agents for change and about the means for implementing this agency.¹⁸ If we regard the "Letter" as an appeal to power and conscience and the proper alignment between the two, we must consider it as an appeal not just to the ostensible white audience but also to the collective power and conscience of black people.

Viewed from this angle, the "Letter" constructs a model for African Americans to adopt and enact. In the opening paragraph, King represents himself in a way that reveals key features of that model. The salutation, "My Dear Fellow Clergymen," sets King on equal footing with the white men he is addressing, and in the sentence that follows, we learn that although King is confined in jail, he is an important and busy man who generally does not have time to answer criticism. In this instance, however, since he thinks the eight clerics are sincere men of good will, he elects to respond to them and to do so in patient and reasonable terms. Thus, even though confined physically, King remains an active agent who exercises choice about when and how to respond to others.

King's immediate situation—his imprisonment—corresponds to the imagery he uses later in the text to characterize the general condition of African Americans. He depicts them as "smothering in an airtight cage of poverty," as forced to sleep "in the uncomfortable corners" of their automobiles, as threatened by the "quicksand of racial injustice," and as prone to fall into the "dark dungeons of complacency." Yet, like King himself, African Americans are beginning to break through these restraints. They are experiencing a new militancy, and they carry the "gospel of freedom," create constructive tension, stride toward freedom, move with "a cosmic energy" toward racial justice, and rise out of the "dark dungeons" to the "hills of creative protest."

By contrast, the white moderates are inert and immobile even though they face no restraints imposed from the outside. They have become, in King's words, stumbling blocks to freedom, dams blocking social progress, silent witnesses of injustice, anesthetized behind stained glass windows, and paralyzed by the chains of conformity. White moderates, then, are passive, while the once passive blacks are becoming agents of change. No longer willing to accept stolid indifference, they demand their rights as American citizens and insist that sincere people of good faith lend them their support. But morally and practically, they are best advised to make these

demands in the spirit of King's example. In breaking out of restraints imposed upon them, they should accept a measure of self-restraint. Although white moderates often fail to exercise proper judgment, they can be called to their better selves through actions that force injustice to their attention and through discourse that addresses them in patient and reasonable terms.

For black readers, then, King's "Letter" offers an invitation to adopt a rather specific conception of themselves as they struggle to attain equal rights, and King's placement of himself within the African American community appears in quite a different light than it does when the text is read from the perspective of a white moderate audience. For the white reader, King's assertion that he "stands between" the "'do-nothingism' of the complacent" and "hatred and despair of the black nationalist" (93) appears as a strategy designed to blunt the accusation that he is an intemperate radical, and it thus functions to help unify the writer and the audience. On the other hand, for the black "eavesdroppers," this placement suggests points of differentiation as well as identity; King's position represents an option that some may accept as the "more excellent way" and others may reject. The black audience, in effect, is instructed about how to distinguish the attitudes of its members and invited to make a positive choice in favor of one of the alternatives.

In sum, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" constructs the persona of an author who is critical of his white audience but not alienated from it. He shares its Christian and democratic values, and recognizes its concern about practical matters, but he also calls upon that audience to acknowledge and act in accordance with its own principles. By insinuating himself within the life-world of his auditors, King can deploy his ethos instrumentally as a means of allaying fears about the immediate scene of social protest, but he can also establish a model of restrained energy that encourages the white audience to reaffirm its basic values as it reconsiders its view of African Americans. At the same time, the text constructs a persona that black readers can use as a model for becoming effective actors on the American scene. Like King, they can view themselves as agents who need not and will not suffer the indifference of white moderates, who can break free of external restraints without losing self-restraint, and who can work from within American society to make fundamental changes in the way they conceive themselves and are conceived by others. Thus at several levels and in respect to different audiences, King's text functions both as an instrument that uses constructions of self to alter attitudes and as a medium for constituting self within a scene composed of "exigencies, constraints, others, and self."

NOTES

1. Thomas W. Benson, "Rhetoric and Autobiography: The Case of Malcolm X," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60 (1974): 1.

2. The terms “interpretive” and “conceptual” are used by James Jasinski to describe what he calls the most important development in rhetorical criticism during the past two decades. This approach, already suggested in Benson’s essay, concentrates on providing “thick descriptions” of particular cases rather than the construction or verification of abstract theoretical principles. See James Jasinski, “The Status of Theory and Method in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Western Journal of Communication* 65 (2001): 249–70; and also the entry entitled “Criticism in Contemporary Rhetorical Studies,” in James Jasinski, *Sourcebook on Rhetoric: Key Concepts in Contemporary Rhetorical Studies* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2001), 124–44.
3. Benson, “Rhetoric and Autobiography,” 6.
4. On the indecorous nature of Malcolm’s rhetoric, see Robert E. Terrill, “Protest, Prophecy, and Prudence in the Rhetoric of Malcolm X,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 4 (2001): 34. Terrill’s reading of Malcolm’s “The Ballot or the Bullet” provides an interesting counterpoint to our interpretation of King’s “Letter” presented in this paper.
5. Detailed accounts of these events are provided in Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 673–802; and David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 231–64.
6. The text of this letter is reprinted in S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the “Letter from Birmingham Jail”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 235–36.
7. Concerning the composition and circulation of the “Letter,” see Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 110–62; E. Culpepper Clark, “An American Dilemma in King’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail,’” in *Martin Luther King and the Sermonic Power of Discourse*, ed. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 34–49; and Martha Solomon Watson’s essay in this issue of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*.
8. Edwin Black, “The Second Persona,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970): 109–19. For reasons that will become apparent later in this essay, we think it would be better to consider the rhetor’s construction of *audiences* rather than of *the audience*, and so we are introducing an amendment to Black’s well-known concept.
9. All references to the “Letter” are from Martin Luther King Jr., *I Have a Dream: Speeches and Writings that Changed the World*, ed. J. M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper, 1986), 83–100. Specific page references to this edition are indicated parenthetically in the text of the paper.
10. Richard P. Fulkerson, “The Public Letter as Rhetorical Form: Structure, Logic, and Style in King’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail,’” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1979): 124. Fulkerson’s essay, in our judgment, remains the most systematic guide to the rhetoric of the “Letter,” and we have relied upon it throughout our reading of the text.
11. Kenneth Burke, *Counterstatement* (Los Altos, Calif.: Hermes, 1931), 125.
12. Fulkerson, “The Public Letter as Rhetorical Form,” 127.
13. See Fulkerson, “The Public Letter as Rhetorical Form,” 128.
14. On the structure and rhetorical impact of the sentence, see Mia Klein, “The Other Beauty of Martin Luther King’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail,’” *College Composition and Communication* 32 (1981): 30–37.
15. Clark, “An American Dilemma,” 48–49.
16. On the immanent role of prophetic discourse, see Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 64–94. James Darsey (*The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* [New York: New York University Press, 1997], 111) puts

the point somewhat differently when he says that the prophet is "simultaneously insider and outsider." But Darsey's point is fundamentally the same as Walzer's—the prophet must be inside the culture but must have achieved sufficient conceptual distance from existing practices to be able to note and criticize discrepancies between those practices and the ideals of the culture. On "rhetorical distance," see Michael Osborn's essay in this issue of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*.

17. James L. Golden and Richard D. Rieke, *The Rhetoric of Black Americans* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1971), 18–19.
18. There is no doubt that King regarded a positive change in black self-esteem as a vital and necessary part of the movement. In other speeches and writings of this period, he maintains that non-violent direct action precipitated psychological change—it contributed to "something revolutionary" that was occurring in the "mind, heart, and soul of Negroes all over America" (*Why We Can't Wait* [New York: Harper and Row, 1964], 64). Nonviolent direct action, he maintained, challenged stereotypes about blacks, often unconsciously accepted by blacks themselves, that they were inferior and unable to act independently because it gave them a means for peaceful action directed toward their own liberation and for connecting local communities into a national network.