

**Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age**, by Adam J. Banks. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2011. 187 pp.

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In his first book, *Race, Rhetoric and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground*, Adam Banks evaluates America's technology sector and its perpetuation of racial inequality. Building on some of those themes, he now gives us a backstory of sorts in *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*. Banks develops and synthesizes a series of arguments surrounding African Americans' participation in, and resistance to, Western controlling technology narratives. Employing Hip Hop as metaphor and DJs as multi-generational storytellers, he guides readers through a text structured as musical elements, beginning with the *SCRATCH*.

Listeners view a scratch as an interruption, or break, in an otherwise contiguous experience (1). Banks postulates on the implications of such disruptions as purposeful and reflective. On page 2, he articulates his goals: to identify and linger in the scratch between African American rhetoric and multi-media writing, and then to remix both to show how such rhetorical performances can inform our field's movements within new media spaces. The framework of the text hinges on these goals.

In chapter 1, *GROOVE*, Banks argues for connections in digital composition theory and praxis, based on discourses that develop outside of traditional university walls. He situates himself among scholars such as Jackie Jones Royster, Ted Grace, Carmen Kynard, and Jeff Rice, then juxtaposes their works beside scholars from the fields of music history, literature, African American folk tradition, and popular culture. Banks asks and answers two questions: firstly, how can inquiry into African American rhetorical performances develop models of access and authentic technology use; and secondly, how could these new models inform culturally-aware writing instruction to benefit African Americans and their fellow student-scholars in everyday and academic rhetorical growth (14-15).

Banks dubs DJs "digital griots," who draw on generational influences to tell stories in multimodal genres inside and outside of African American discourse communities. The DJ's musical compositions provide key elements that are relevant to academic textual compositions, such as sampling quotes, crate-digging as research, remixing as critical evaluation, and giving shoutouts to credit sources. In multimodal writing, the DJ also uses diverse writing spaces and media to hone his/her storytelling skills. Some of these technologies are culturally well documented (videos, radio, slams), while others are emerging (iTunes, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace). Banks argues that the visuality and orality of these technologies, and their corresponding pedagogical opportunities in multi-modal writing, can be informed by

traditional African American rhetorics. *GROOVE* ends as all chapters in this text do, with a shoutout to fellow scholars and rhetorical practitioners, who have worked in the Scratch to create mixes of past and present experiences.

Moving to *MIX* (chapter 2), Banks asserts the DJ's agency and authority in "mixing" together community discourses and rhetorical strategies in writing/telling African American life experiences in the digital age. As a griot, the DJ must employ strategies to not only produce the texts/tracks, but also to connect them seamlessly, with an awareness of audience and style. As he connects the DJ's actions to divergent writing spaces, Banks acknowledges the difficulty inherent in "mixing" the two competing discourses of vernacular/everyday writing and scholarly/academic compositions (51). He further notes the dualistic spaces in which both of these discourses are embedded. First, he describes the tensions that African American scholars must negotiate in how they present community-based compositions to colleagues in academic discourses. Next, Banks challenges scholars to see the value in community discourses as spaces where writing instructors can witness processes of discursive formations. He then moves into a brief overview of his own teaching experiences in tackling such challenges, evaluating the competing communities of writing as he presents a sample of his work with community-based writing courses, complete with reading lists, an abbreviated course design, learning outcomes, and student work from these collaborative endeavors. He links his personal praxis to community rhetorics that resist and contest dominant discourses in composition classrooms. In an honest dialogue with the reader, he owns his subjectivity and advocacy of his community scholarship projects, in which he brought together Syracuse University student-scholars and student-scholars from the surrounding community to create and share writing in diverse media (58-70). In his courses, instructors are not experts who fill students with knowledge, but facilitators and observers of the processes in which students operate. Here again he channels one of the DJ's goals: to mix together tracks into a synchronous composition. In the final pages of this chapter, Banks links his pedagogy to his advocacy of bi-directional informing relationships between community rhetorics and their academic counterparts.

Through *REMLX* (chapter 3), Banks presents digital griots as creative bridge-builders, who link "back in the day" narratives, which Banks defines as stories within African American communities that cause tensions between generations and yet contain a great deal of ethos (87), to future rhetorical exigencies through multi-media discourses. Banks calls out the DJ as a figure who can draw on the ethos of "Old School" rhetorical experiences to forge new African American narratives, thereby synchronizing past and future. In reconciling generational gaps in African American cultural discourses, the DJ maps out new rhetorical paths, and through his performance, encourages ways for young and old generations to speak through what Banks calls a "generational chasm" (103), a communicative disconnect, often exacerbated by technology. For Banks, remixing is a creative act, one that requires griots

to cut and paste generational discourses and combine them as tracks into a seamless composition. The DJ also serves as a conduit through which community writers draw on cultural inspiration to re-envision oral, visual, and digital texts. Banks next describes how initiatives such as eBlack Studies serve as important spaces for digital remixes to operate.

Banks connects African American cultural institutions to their digital revisions in *MIXTAPE* (chapter 4). He links his theoretical arguments from previous chapters to practical actions that griots must take in order to reconcile tensions between competing cultural rhetorics in African American communities. Drawing inspiration from Black Theology and Womanist theoretical frameworks, Banks builds a mixtape of African American discourse and rhetorical performances. He reconceptualizes these rhetorics in digital environments and reflects on the tensions inherent in romanticizing African Americans' participation in, and resistance to, technological discourses. For Banks, composition classrooms become practical sites of resistance to Western controlling narratives of homogenization (130). I took this as a call to composition instructors to seek out, in both theory and praxis, vernacular writing practices and weave them into students' rhetorical strategies and authorial agency. Again, in this chapter we see Banks' fierce advocacy for digital access and its innate significance to sharing knowledge. Referencing Black Theology discourse, he then associates access and agency with ethical issues surrounding shared knowledge and collaboration versus solitary writing and plagiarism. He links the theoretical to practical concerns and defines his own pedagogical praxis as he explicates the validity of collaboration in digital spaces (139). He succinctly demonstrates how Compositionists can address two overarching issues for African American student-scholars: firstly, access; and secondly, the role of writing instruction and its complicity in denying cultural and racial diversity on University campuses (137-138). He uses the mixtape as a metaphor for collaboration between past and present rhetorics, as a means to inform future rhetorical performances.

In his concluding chapter, Banks ties together significant elements of his goals then challenges writing instructors to re-think our praxis because of them. He has already affirmed the DJ as a writer and mixer of cultural rhetorics, a legacy of a heritage and the creator of it. He has demonstrated how African Americans have historically informed technologies and how they continue to do so in multi-modal and multi-disciplinary ways. Banks leaves readers with a renewed challenge to view African American rhetorics as remixed conceptions that blend together both community and academic discourses. We should approach African American rhetoric 2.0 as digital humanities discourse, one that informs and is informed by "techno-dialogics" and shared knowledge production. He calls for "bold, creative, innovative use of technologies" (159) and sustained inquiry into the ways African Americans both participate in and resist technology, specifically in regards to access and engaged use. For Banks, the future of composition praxis lies not only in producing multi-modal texts, but also in acknowledging the fact

that marginalized rhetorics have informed, and continue to inform, their production.

With its blend of theory and praxis, *Digital Griots* is a good read for composition scholars who want to re-think how we approach community-based rhetorics. It provides a fresh view of how these rhetorics operate in academic spaces. Banks weaves his arguments through both conversational and field-specific language, giving readers a balanced mix of both, and allowing us to share his advocacy and relate it to our own classroom experiences. The book's biggest weakness for me was its lack of pedagogical strategies; I was left wanting a chapter that focused on specific strategies for implementing his teaching models. Regardless, Banks' writing projects and case studies, as well as his call to re-envision African American Rhetoric 2.0, are significant social topics that should inform conversations in our field as it continues to evolve into multi-modalities and multi-disciplinary environments.

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