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Reviews



Review: *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*, by Adam J. Banks. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011.

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In *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*, a provocative new edition to the CCCC Studies in Writing & Rhetoric series, Adam Banks offers a fresh perspective on the relationships between race, technology, and scholar-activism. Like the figure of the griot—a masterful storyteller who simultaneously preserves and shapes history—Banks mashes up past and present disciplinary discourses as a means of influencing future conversations about race and digital literacies.

Banks' text builds upon and extends the work of many prominent scholars of African American rhetoric. He aligns himself with groundbreaking academics such as Bill Cook, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and Keith Gilyard, and with “generation 2.0”—scholars who have begun to push discourses in African American rhetoric in new and interesting directions: Gwendolyn Pough, Vershawn Young, Kermit Campbell, and Vorris Nunley, to name a few. Despite the exceptional work these scholars have contributed to the field, Banks notes, “when it comes to discussions of race, ethnicity, and culture in multimedia writing,” there is a paucity of attention to the technology practices of minorities, and a comparative lack of scholars of color (6).



Banks amplifies this paucity by critiquing multimodal scholarship that considers DJ-like writing techniques without elaborating on the contexts, traditions, and cultures from which these techniques have emerged—conversations initiated by composition scholars such as Jeff Rice, Stuart Selber, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, and Geoff Sirc. Thus, Banks’ intervention is two fold: to bring issues of technology to the forefront of African American rhetorics and to infuse multimodal composing practices with a more substantial cultural, political, and racial context.

Ultimately, Banks wants his readers to “imagine an African American rhetoric 2.0, as a digital humanities project, as a thorough linking of texts, techne, and technologies in the examination of how black people have engaged in the techno-dialogic, or the mutually constitutive relationships that endure between humans and their technologies” (155). Given Banks’ persistent attention to context throughout the book, I was a little surprised about his rather loose use of the term “digital humanities” here. When one considers the fractured and contentious debates regarding the definition of digital humanities and its role in academia, this connection seems underdeveloped and tenuous. Regardless of how Banks labels the project, though, *Digital Griots* is a valuable read for anyone interested in the teaching and practice of multimodal composition and/or cultural rhetorics, and it is particularly informative for scholar-activists who are invested in community literacy.

The book opens with “Scratch: Two Turntables and a Storytelling Tradition,” in which Banks presents the DJ as a contemporary model of the griot—a digital griot that has helped make possible postmodern conceptions of composition like the mix, remix, and mixtape. Banks uses the figure of the digital griot to contextualize popular multimodal composing practices, rooting them firmly in the African American tradition.

Chapter 1, “Groove: Synchronizing African American Rhetoric and Multimedia Writing through the Digital Griot,” outlines the ways



in which griotic figures (preachers, storytellers, political activists, comedians, etc.) have contributed to writing practices that are already valued in multimodal composing: citations, archival research, mixing, sampling, remixing, and mixtaping (26). Additionally, Banks identifies aspects of griotic rhetorical practices that do not receive as much attention in multimedia instruction, such as developing an awareness of community ethical issues, questions, and commitments (26).

In Chapter 2, “Mix: Roles, Relationships, and Rhetorical Strategies in Community Engagement,” Banks continues to explore how the figure of the digital griot provides a lens for examining community-based scholarship and activism. He addresses the tensions African Americans encounter in taking a griotic approach to community work and thinks through his own attempts to find a balanced scholarly approach to interacting with community organizations. This chapter is full of pedagogical resources, including Banks’ own course descriptions and reading lists for the various community-based courses he has taught over the years.

Banks exploits the theoretical possibilities of the remix as a way to synchronize African American generational discourses and goals in Chapter 3, “Remix: Afrofuturistic Roadmaps—Rememory Remixed for a Digital Age.” Banks illustrates how the “back in the day” narrative—stories that depict the past as a kind of golden age in comparison to the present—is actually “an intentional remixing of history” that is employed to take stock of significant experiences, values, and knowledge of the past to move toward future action (101). Banks argues that Hip Hop’s use of sampling, mixing, and remixing to link past, present, and future offers the next step in synchronizing old school/new school generational disruptions.

Chapter 4, “Mixtape: Black Theology’s Mixtape Movement at Forty,” characterizes the history of Black Theology, a key rhetorical site in the struggle for black freedom, as a movement with the purpose of



synthesizing, layering, and mixing radical democratic and nationalist impulses. As in previous chapters, Banks demonstrates how griotic strategies rooted in African American history have shaped contemporary multimedia practices. In this case, he connects the genre of the sermon, which emphasizes textual borrowing, to contemporary debates about intellectual property conventions and open source practices.

In his brief but illuminating final chapter, “Fade: Notes Toward an African American Rhetoric 2.0,” Banks calls for a rethinking of multimedia writing as a “digital humanities project” that bonds technologies to humanistic inquiry and practice (154). He delivers an urgent reminder that multimedia instruction cannot simply be an exercise in craft or technical assembly. Rather, oral, print, and digital modes of communication need to be contextualized and discussed in relation to peoples, cultures, and traditions.

Perhaps the most impressive feature of *Digital Griots* is the display of Banks’ own griotic abilities. By weaving together voices, texts, music, websites, and blogs of the past and present, he steers readers toward a better, more inclusive, and more human digital future. It is clear that the people and communities whose voices and stories are sounded on nearly every page have had a profound effect on Banks’ own writing and thinking. From his “Shoutouts” to noteworthy projects, leaders, and organizations that conclude each chapter, to the prolific naming of people who have affected Banks academically and personally, this book represents a genuine collaboration—a textual mixtape. *Digital Griots* is a community manifest.