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Race, rhetoric, and technology: searching for higher ground.

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In *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology*, Adam Banks contributes significantly to scholarship at the intersections of literacy, technical communication, and African American rhetoric. He argues that African Americans have always had to struggle for technological access, and that, subsequently, an African American rhetoric of what he calls “transformative access” can add substantially to current conversations about technology and access. Banks focuses on the rhetoric of the “digital divide” to point out the limitations of previous and current conversations about access, conversations that more often than not end up reverting to binaries—technology provides access or technological access is hindered—rather than moving toward a fuller understanding of the challenges surrounding issues of access and technology. For Banks, transformative

technological access moves beyond the rhetoric of access as just consumption and instead allows for equity in the realm of technological production and ownership. A rhetoric that emphasizes a Black digital ethos, he argues, is the vehicle for moving both cultural and academic conversations in this direction: “mastery of individual technological tools and more general theoretical awareness comes together in what I argue needs to become a Black digital ethos—a set of attitudes, knowledges, expectations, and commitments that we need to develop and teach and bring to our engagement with things technological” (p. 47-49).

In positing a Black digital ethos, Banks opens up the realm of African American rhetoric and points to an important yet missing conversation in technical communication scholarship, discussions of race. In “Oakland, the Word, and The Divide: How We All Missed The Moment,” Banks provides a critique of current conversations in disciplinary circles including composition and rhetoric, technical communication, and computers and writing. He points out that while national conversations during the 1990s focused on what was to become known as the digital divide, which he defines as “a concept to acknowledge the systematic differences in technology access that African Americans, other racial minorities and those in rural areas experienced” (12), English departments were once again debating Ebonics while questions of race and technological access were more or less ignored there and elsewhere in the academy. Furthermore, the emphasis on an oral rhetorical tradition, compiled with the stereotype that African Americans “just don’t ‘do’ science and technology” (p. 21), has led to little serious attention to technology discussion even among the scholarship of African American rhetoric. For Banks, however, technological access should be “the key ethical issue that must drive all of our conversations about technologies and their relationship to written communication” (p. 20).

Banks calls on his audience to recognize the digital divide as a “rhetorical problem” that reduces the problem of access to an issue only of “connectivity” to computers or the web rather than a recognition of the significant systematic and material inequalities that exist. In his critique of current conversations about access, he argues that we need to recognize issues of access as so much more than just connectivity. “Beyond the tools themselves,” he writes, “meaningful access requires users, individually and collectively, to be able to use, critique, resist, design, and change technologies in ways that are relevant to their lives and needs” (p. 41). Banks keenly observes the need for multiple levels of access to exist if change, and thus true access, is to actually occur. To complicate our limited understandings of access, he identifies four kinds of access that need to be addressed: material access (ownership and/or proximity in order for use to occur), functional access (the knowledge and skills needed in order to use technology once material access is realized), experiential access (meaningful and relevant use), and critical access (the ability to question and “resist” technology when needed (p. 41-42). Certainly, one of the most insightful contributions Banks offers with this text, these levels of access provide a useful theoretical framework for repositioning conversations about access in both educational and public debates.

In remaining chapters, Banks offers critiques of exclusionary technological structures as well as examples of how African Americana might move toward transformative access via a Black digital ethos. He begins with a discussion of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, suggesting that both civil rights orators use a Black digital ethos to further the cause of African American struggle in the 1960s. In “Taking Black Technology Use Seriously: African American Discursive traditions in the Digital Underground,” he performs a contemporary analysis of African American discourse patterns on the Internet site BlackPlanet. He demonstrates how

African Americans users access BlackPlanet in meaningful ways, resisting the ways in which cyberspace has developed as a White cultural construct. Both chapters impress upon readers the ways in which, as Banks reminds us, African American struggle has always come up against issues of technology and how African Americans, therefore, have always had to manipulate it and appropriate technology in order to claim meaningful access.

The next chapter, “Rewriting Racist Code: The Black Jeremiad as Countertechnology in Critical Race Theory” introduces the American legal system as a technological construct. Banks argues for the jeremiad as a rhetorical form that disrupts the racist discursive conventions of our legal system. He cites use of the Black jeremiad by Harvard law professor Derrick Bell in *And We Are Not Saved* as an example of one such disruption, suggesting that “form is every bit as important a site of protest as content” (p. 104) when it comes to enacting transformation. While I would have liked less discussion of Bell’s particular use of the jeremiad and more discussion as to how this rhetorical form might be used to counter other racist technologies and make arguments for access, I appreciate how Banks challenges our assumptions concerning what constitutes technology in this chapter. In foregrounding legal discourse as a technology, he makes transparent the relationship between language and knowledge—that is, that language shapes and structures how we come to know.

Chapter six, “Through this Hell Into Freedom: Black Architects, Slave Quilters, and an African American Rhetoric of Design,” furthers his attention to form with a discussion of visual rhetoric and design. As important as it is to critique exclusionary technological constructs, the struggle for meaningful access also demands equity in the realm of design and policy making, Banks point out. Demonstrating that access is a rhetorical problem as much as it is a material one, he puts forth design as an important rhetorical element that can assist in realizing access for

marginalized groups. In doing so, he etches an African American rhetoric of design that pulls from African American architecture and Black quilters. With these two examples of African American design, Banks points to a tradition of design in African American culture, a legacy of design that historically provided—and, he argues can continue to provide—avenues toward transformative access for African Americans. Banks closes his book with a call to reconsider the role of technology within the history of African American rhetoric. Specifically, he argues for a digitalization of the African American tradition, extended analysis of racial constructs online, a recognition of technological access as a major trope within African American rhetoric, and an acknowledgement of the importance of design within African American rhetoric.

Banks' analysis deftly illustrates how African Americans have historically engaged issues of technology, making a compelling argument for the importance of conceiving a technological African American rhetoric. In doing so, he successfully demonstrates that to put forward the Black experience as tied to technological struggle is not to essentialize Black identity; instead such group identification is essential for transformation to happen. And while his main purpose is toward reshaping the African American rhetorical tradition, his theorizing on access provides a necessary complication to broader debates concerning the value of technology, particularly in light of recent arguments that link technology and literacy to the rise of the knowledge economy.