Banks, Adam. *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age.* **Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 2011.**

Reviewed by William J. Torgerson

If you have been a reluctant adopter of technology, or you are the sort of writing teacher who so far has left the discussion surrounding digital literacy to somebody else, Adam Banks's *Digital Griots* just might be the book to get you moving when it comes to the work your students need for you to do so they can powerfully take their voices into digital spaces. Like the late comedian Bernie Mac, Banks wants to know "WHO YOU WIT!?!?!?" (111). By this, there's an implication that as writing teachers we're not allowed to stay neutral, that staying neutral puts a teacher of writing on one side or the other. Of course just about all of us would like to say we are with our students, but if we're failing to help the writers we work with consider the ways digital texts get written and for what purposes, then we just might be unwittingly aligning ourselves with one of the many "systems of domination" that exert their power through digital media (18).

In *Digital Griots*, Banks comes at this question of whom we're with by drawing on all sorts of voices including comedians, hip hop artists, and scholars in composition. He invokes Bradford T. Stull's *Amid the Fall, Dreaming of Eden: Du Bois, King, Malcolm X, and Emancipatory Composition* to ask, "Whom, what, does composition serve?" (112). This is a question that takes me back to the days when I went to graduate school with the idea that I'd be a writer who taught writing. In other words, I hadn't been introduced into the politicized nature of what it is to teach writing. Sure, tangentially I had it as a goal to empower writers through helping them craft their texts and become rhetorically self-aware readers, but I hadn't thought of myself as any kind of emancipator.

Now I know that universities are full of people who'd like to "correct" a sentence such as this one from a writer who worked with Banks: "If I got caught doing something wrong, Ms. So-and-

So would whup my behind right then and there, and then I would always get another whuppin when I got home, because the news always beat you home—even if you didn't have a phone" (96). Just as there's been a lot of work done and work that still needs to be done to make sure each voice has the space to be honored and heard within the university conversation, Banks urges us to what's next: "Black people must see themselves in the digital story" (5).

For someone like me, who is not black and who teaches three sections of first year writing courses each semester, I wonder to what degree I'm helping my students see themselves in the digital story. I came to this text as someone intellectually hungry on the subject of multimodal writing in the classroom, but not as an African American Rhetoric or digital writing scholar. I'm first a creative writer with an M.F.A. degree in fiction who writes novels and scripts and who has come to digital texts—certainly at first—the result of a university push for an online component to writing courses. For me, this requirement has taken me on an intellectual journey from course management systems such as Blackboard on to Wordpress blogs, to investigations made possible by a technology grant, to where I am now incorporating video into our writing projects and working with my students to write ePortfolios. It's also an intellectual trip that brought me to *Digital Griots*.

Banks's text was suggested to me by my colleague, Dr. Carmen Kynard, who directs the First-Year Composition program where I teach at St. John's University in New York. I had been pestering her—along with another colleague—for about a month to join me in my attempt to begin to publish conversations about writing to iTunes via the program *Prof. Torg's Read, Write, & Teach Digital Book Club*. As it turned out—unbeknownst to Carmen—she was given some props in *Digital Griots* for her article, "Wanted: Some Black Long Distance [Writers]: Blackboard Flava Flavin and other AfroDigital experiences in the classroom." If you are a teacher of writing, you likely know how difficult it is to make time to read any text that hasn't been assigned for your class or written by one of your students. Many of us chose to teach writing

in part because we loved to read, but because it can be difficult to make time for the act, I tried to give myself–and two of my colleagues–an assignment of sorts. That Carmen suggested a book with the words "digital" and "multimedia" in the title was an added bonus to my Digital Book Club project.

Given my lack of expertise all things African American rhetoric and griot storytellers, I found it helpful that Banks opened the first chapter by invoking D'Jimo Kouyate who in his essay "The Role of the Griot" explains, "One of the roles that the griot in African society had before the Europeans came was maintaining a cultural and historical past with that of the present" (10). In order to achieve this sort of conversation with the past in *Digital Griots*, Banks takes the identity of the African griot storyteller and connects that role to the modern-day DJ. He explains the purpose of his book as follows:

> This book looks to scratch, to interrupt, to play a while in the grooves of two records–disciplinary conversations about African American rhetoric and those about multimedia writing–to begin to blend and loop them while posing one question: how can African American rhetorical traditions and practices inform composition's current endeavors to define, theorize, and practice multimedia writing? (2)

Reading this, I begin to consider the rhetorical traditions of my students–whatever those traditions might be–and reflect on the ways I have and have not helped them bring their rhetorical histories into the writing we do together. In passages such as the one above, Banks admirably allows the worlds relevant to the subject matter of *Digital Griots*–in this case the world of the DJ and African American culture–to inform the figurative language choices he makes within the book. Phrases such as "wiki with the audience," the notion of the "scratch," and Banks's description of his reluctance to write about community work as "like a double-dutch jump-roper lurching toward the rope but never jumping . . . " are all examples of writing to be admired for the

ways in which they connect the content of the book to the language choices made in the writing of the text (51, 2, 41).

Digital Griots has an interesting structure in that, as Banks describes, it "models the mix and remix and becomes a kind of a mixtape of its own" (7-8). The book opens with a chapter entitled "Groove: Synchronizing African American Rhetoric and Multimedia Writing through the Digital Griot." Banks is sharp here, using the metaphor of the griot to bring together African American Rhetoric and the need for that rhetoric to reach digital spaces in meaningful ways. For those writing teachers hanging back out of this virtual place, Banks establishes here that "Our immersion in so many media and technologies becomes a central element of what writing has become . . . " (12). Banks debunks technology as a neutral tool and highlights "African American skepticism of white, Western reverence—even worship—of technology and the fierce determination that black people have always had to be free, to assert their own individual and collective humanity in relationship with technologies and in resistance to systems of domination" (18). Banks harks back to the Ebonics debates and offers a challenge:

> at this moment in 2011, anyone still attempting to argue that Ebonics is a problem for black students or that it is somehow connected to a lack of intelligence or lack of desire to achieve is about as useful as a Betamax video cassette player, and it's time for those folks to be retired, be they teachers, administrators, or community leaders, so the rest of us can try to do some real work in the service of equal access for black students and all students. (15)

I appreciate the "Betamax" metaphor, and I read this passage as both an argument and invitation that I think we're ready for when it comes to digital media. Let me rework Banks's lines here into a challenge for my teaching and maybe yours, too. At this moment in 2011, anyone still attempting to teach writing without incorporating digital texts is about as useful as a Betamax video

cassette player, and it's time for those folks to be retired so the rest of us can try to do some real work in the service of equal access for all students. So I've used Banks's language and reworked it into an extension or rephrasing of the argument I read in *Digital Griots*.

Once Banks establishes the urgency with which we should try and help our students into digital conversations, we are warned in "Mix: Roles, Relationships, and Rhetorical Strategies in Community Engagement" about the ways in which writing into the digital space can require us to give up who we are in order to participate via the multimodal text. It's a chapter which for me eulogizes my axing of Blackboard from my classes in order to use Wordpress blogs for some of the increased ways in which writers can customize the look of the pages according to who they are and the education they are in the midst of claiming. As suggested by the word "community" in this chapter, Banks's work is not confined to the physical boundaries of the campus. Here he details his extensive community-building projects. Banks explains his philosophy as related to working with the community that surrounds campus: "The one-way model of a professor taking his or her 'expertise' to some audience that professor has decided could benefit from it has its place, but it was never my place or my way" (45). Banks notes here—and it's an observation that I can easily link to what I've experienced when students write with me in a digital space—I learn at least as much from the students as they learn from me. Rather than thinking of himself as someone who will impart his knowledge to the community, Banks recognizes how much he learns from those in the community with whom he works.

The highlight of the mix chapter for me was the course descriptions of the classes Banks taught in the community. My favorite was "Afrofuturism: Communities, Technologies, Struggle," which "asked people to consider how technologies can be used, reimagined, and redesigned to meet the needs of African American communities and challenged people to develop futuristic visions for neighborhoods, cities, and the broader

African American community" (71). It's a course that holds a lot of possibilities for my own teaching in that students of all rhetorical histories can work to reimagine how technology might meet the needs of their various and diverse communities. This chapter is especially practical in that it contains a list of readings and ten classroom activities including a technology literacy narrative and storytelling festival.

From community engagement and service learning, Banks takes us to the "Remix: Afrofuturistic Roadmaps–Rememory Remixed for a Digital Age" and warns us of the dangers we all face when we refuse to look critically at the power that is inherent in the digital wave of texts that assaults most of us. Banks turns to poet Kamau Daaood whose "Blakey's Sticks" causes me to consider all those students–and sometimes myself–who can be found walking across campus with their minds in their phones oblivious to those around them. Take note of Daaood's treacherous metaphor which describes, "a spider, waiting for you on the world wide web,/wants you to pick cotton in cyberspace" (94).

As a teacher of writing, I find it a tricky philosophical trail to try and balance my invitation into the digital space with the dangers that can come from cell phone or computer addiction. Even the prospect of introducing a computer or cell phone into class seems to invite a student to fiddle with those devices instead of listening to their classmates or engaging in face-to-face conversation. I didn't leave Banks's book with a clear idea of who these digital enslavers might be, but I am more than ever on the lookout for ways in which the net can dehumanize any of us and reduce us to homogenized and mindless punchers of the keys who fill up somebody else's bank account or increase the virtual clout of some power or another.

In "Fade: Notes toward an African American Rhetoric 2.0," Banks ends where he began, by invoking DJ Paul D. Miller who proclaims that "DJing is writing, writing is is DJing" (153). As someone who tries to expand students' notions of what a text is–including texts that range from the clothes we choose in the morning to all those ads that visit us when we're reading from

computer screens–I'm fully onboard with the tight connections that exist between the notions of traditional essay writing, DJing, filmmaking, and even speaking to one another in class. Yes, Banks has established that the modern day DJ can be seen as a descendant of the African griot, and he's done much more than answer, "What are blackfolk doing online?" (157). He's given us a definition for what it might mean to be a digital griot: " . . . the ability to produce in multiple modalities and to understand the conventions, possibilities, and constraints of various modalities; a deep and searching understanding of the traditions and cultures of one's community; and a rhetorical focus on being able to move the crowd, which requires (among other things) an ability and willingness to speak across the continua or tensions that mark a particular community at a particular time" (161-162). As a writer who teaches writing, Banks has given me a vision to which I can aspire.

Work Cited

Kynard, Carmen. "Wanted: Some Black Long Distance [Writers]: Blackboard Flava Flavin and other AfroDigital experiences in the classroom." *Computers and Composition* 24 (2007): 329-45. Print.