

On African-American Rhetoric, by Keith Gilyard and Adam J. Banks. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018. 146 pp.

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In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) adopted the Students' Right to Their Own Language resolution (full statement published in *College English* the following year). This landmark resolution acknowledged that differences in language production vary according to individual and group non-negotiable differences. While Students' Right helped to reinforce and legitimize the ways historically marginalized speakers make meaning out of language, scholarship in the field of alternative literacies was already underway long before CCCC formally recognized deviations from standardized English. Entire ecologies of meaning-making, such as African-American literacies, African-American rhetoric, Black English, and Black discourse had been (and continue to be) ripe for investigation.

Keith Gilyard and Adam J. Banks' research into African-American rhetoric studies in *On African-American Rhetoric* uncovers the various complex and critical rhetorical methods employed by African-American artists, authors, and orators. The authors unearth a representative sampling of textual, oral, and performative artifacts from a long line of African-American cultural productions. In doing so, Gilyard and Banks locate strategic language use by African Americans in various rhetorical forms, such as slave narratives, poetry, folklore, music, and memes (6). The analysis therein draws from the growing body of contemporary scholarship concerning African-American rhetoric, thereby arming educators, scholars, and students with a critical framework for analyzing the ever-growing field of African-American rhetoric and its rhetorical productions.

Chapter one draws on Deborah Atwater's scholarship to highlight the elasticity of African-American rhetoric. This elasticity is present in the authors' definition of African-American rhetoric as: "the art of persuasion fused with African-American ways of knowing in attempts to achieve in public realms personhood, dignity, and respect . . . for African-American people" (3). In short, African-American rhetoric is about strategy and the way such strategy is communicated. Such communication occurs in private, interpersonal spaces and broader, public spheres, therefore requiring an elastic definition that encompasses a range of epistemologies. Establishing a non-exhaustive definition serves the whole text well by making it easier to access the codes informing the African-American experience.

Having established a working definition, the authors investigate the history of African-American rhetoric in chapter two. They argue there is "no straight line from the ruminations of Aristotle to modern Black thought and

verbal output” (10). To come to this conclusion, the authors uncover the origins of the African-American rhetorical tradition from both African and Western influences. Of particular importance is the uncovering of the historic rhetorical methods of African-American literature, agentic self-identification, and public outcries for personhood. Through thematic analysis, composition scholars may identify a unique application of pathos in African-American rhetorical productions: the usage of the oppressor’s language as means to seek freedom. Black speakers have historically utilized a pliable and flexible English language for making public their private plights towards freedom, personhood, and humanity.

The major theme in chapter three considers the integrationist and separatist strains of African-American rhetoric. The integrationist strain is identified in the African-American jeremiad (wherein Blacks self-identify as the chosen people whose purpose is to redeem liberty for all). The separatist strain argues for the individual choice to separate Blacks from the rest of the United States to preserve the African elements of Black culture. Gilyard and Banks recognize that both strains are historic but continue to thrive in modern discourses. Their analysis of Black-nationalist thought (e.g., Black Power) charts how separatists and integrationists alike strategically accepted and rejected discourse for specific purposes.

Chapter four traces the history of African-American rhetorical theory. Here, Gilyard and Banks outline three specific theories that continue to frame the way African-American rhetoric is studied and taught in the academy: Molefi Kete Asante’s comprehensive scholarship on Afrocentrism; Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s literary theory of the Signifying Monkey; and broadly, Black feminism. It is made clear that the three ideologies are not alone in college classrooms but prove especially generative (46). In short, ignoring Afrocentric ideals would make the scholarly study of African-American rhetoric impossible, “for it would lack an object of study” (47). Because Afrocentrism acknowledges the African sources of African-American culture in the United States, it is central to the study of African-American rhetoric. Likewise, Gilyard and Banks recognize Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s significant contribution to literary theory (especially as it pertains to African-American literature) with the Signifying Monkey. It is worth noting that this theory is particularly useful when African-American literature is viewed as a conscious act of language production. Gilyard and Banks broadly identify the final theory as “Black feminism,” defined as “identity formation and initiatives for social change fueled by the experiences and perspectives of Black women” (60). Black feminism, the authors argue, is integral to the study of African-American rhetoric because it acknowledges non-negotiable differences outside of nationality and race. Incorporating womanness into the study of African-American texts helps locate the lost voices

of Black women and their contributions to the African-American rhetorical legacy. Black feminism also provides various frameworks for understanding and contextualizing Black women's writing when analyzed through the lenses of womanism, wreck, and misogynoir.

An extension of existing academic discourse, chapters five and six expand on Banks' 2011 monograph, *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*. Chapter five continues Banks' work into Black digital studies by asking how African-American rhetoric has responded to, adopted, and utilized technology. Technology is found across much African-American literature and is primarily embedded in tropes and motifs. For instance, separatism, escapism, the mothership, and flight are mobilized by means of technological advancement. But it is in the following chapter, "Rhetoric and Black Twitter," where readers see the possibilities and limitations of Black rhetorical productions in the age of social media. Chapter six specifically focuses on Black Twitter and how its users bring Black discourse and perspectives to a technologically proficient yet largely White space. Gilyard and Banks point to specific examples to show how Black Twitter allows users to generate messages of the Black experience beyond the platform itself and into the public sphere, thereby making Black Twitter essential to African American rhetoric. Much of chapter six analyzes different practices seen on Black Twitter, such as "dragging," "clapbacks", and "THIS!!!!!!" – each expressing core tenets of African American rhetoric: affirmation, signifyin', and resistance.

In tradition with scholarship in composition and rhetorical studies, chapter seven discusses African-American rhetoric in the college classroom by identifying historic Black voices in rhetoric/composition studies and how those voices have influenced the teaching of literacy and language. The chapter reviews pedagogical scholarship by the authors, in addition to that of Hallie Quinn Brown, Karmen Kynard, Geneva Smitherman, and Carter G. Woodson. Their analysis of useful teaching methods that manifest those core tenets of African-American rhetoric (especially that of legitimacy in a largely White, capitalist, Eurocentric industry) helps us better understand transgressive practices for teaching African-American students *and* teaching Black discourse in academic settings. So, tactics like gospel literacy, rap-imbued writing, Black Queer literacies, code meshing, pluralism, Students' Right, and critical language awareness are possible and work because contemporary rhetoric/composition studies typically advocate for *Black* discourse to be viewed as *academic* discourse. Scholars can use these tactics to validate the epistemological value of Black discursive power within academe.

On African-American Rhetoric serves multifaceted purposes for readers. For instance, composition educators may adopt *On African-American Rhetoric* in their graduate courses concerning writing theory to highlight the contribu-

tions of Black and African-American scholars and expose students to emerging subfields. Said graduate students will find chapters four and seven to be particularly useful in developing transgressive pedagogies and for teaching diverse student bodies. But it is in the conclusion where Gilyard and Banks address scholars explicitly. *On African-American Rhetoric* commences with a poignant discussion regarding the possibilities and limits of rhetoric, especially for African Americans. In short, the conclusion asks what rhetoric/composition scholars do now and where they ought to go next as African-American rhetoric continues to grow as a field of study and discourse. Gilyard and Banks offer six areas for future research. First, more scholarship is needed in out-of-school settings, such as analysis of the Black political speech writers, STEM workers, and digital-content creators. Additional scholarship is needed in the intersectionality of African-American rhetoric with various ethnic rhetorics and ethnic rhetorical traditions as a whole. The fourth call asks scholars to consider “questions of technology and rhetoric...to understand technology(ies) as a site of inquiry rather than as merely a site of production of discourse” (123). Fifth is the archival/curation of texts. And the sixth calls for additional study of visual rhetorics.

It is worth noting that in a contemporary era that spews post-racial rhetorics alongside Black Lives Matter, *On African-American Rhetoric* provides insight into the purposeful formation of Blackness in public discourse. Gilyard and Banks craft an artful and scientific analysis of Black cultural productions and its existing artifacts. In light of the text, those interested in alternative literacies and counter-languages must ask: How do Black speakers negate the tumultuous conversations surrounding Blackness in the hands of various power structures that continue to deny Black humanity? And what can we, as educators and scholars, do to support the legacy of Black rhetoricians in such a power struggle? Overall, *On African-American Rhetoric* proves an invaluable tool for educators, scholars, and students who wish to uncover the means through which meaning is made in African-American cultural productions.

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Works Cited

- Banks, Adam, *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2011.
- Committee on CCC Language Statement. Students' Right to their Own Language. *College English*, vol. 36, no. 6, 1975, pp. 708-726.