In 1999, Cynthia Selfe warned composition teachers about the “perils of not paying attention” to technology studies. New technologies were mediating writing contexts, Selfe argued, and teachers of the humanities simply had to pay attention to them, something she did not believe was happening. Composition studies may have done some work to remedy this problem; however, if issues in composing and technology have been marginalized, then, as Adam Banks might see it, issues of access to technologies have been on the margins of the margins. Adam Banks’ *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground* deftly blends rhetorical analysis with intense, lyrical prose to focus our attention on the racialization and inequality of access to technologies. Banks’s book has two aims. First, it contributes to composition studies by developing a rich understanding of access to technologies and arguing it should be a central concern in our work. Second, *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology* contributes to African American rhetoric through a reading of how “African American rhetors have used and manipulated communication technologies” in the face of limited access, something Banks hopes can “foster both access and transformation” (29). According to Banks, his reading of African American rhetoric offers a new set of tools for analyzing rhetorical production, an expanded ken of artifacts to address, and the opportunity to develop arguments that expose the political investment of supposedly “neutral” technologies, with an emphasis on how racism becomes “programmed” into such technologies (39-40).

In chapter 2, Banks documents the relative dearth of attention paid to issues of access to writing technologies in composition studies and technical writing. Then, through an analysis of multiple documents, including the U.S. Department of Commerce’s 1995 report “Falling Through the Net,” Banks shows how the concept of access in Digital Divide discourse is too often limited to its material dimension: access is defined in terms of connectivity and ownership of technologies (32). Building from the work of James Porter, as well as Cynthia and Richard Selfe, Banks offers a fuller understanding of access through four dimensions: material, functional, experiential, and critical. Material access is concerned with the economic conditions that “drive” the use or nonuse of technology. Functional access is the skills necessary to make productive use of the technology available. Experiential access relates to the conditions that render the use of technology an important and relevant part in people’s lives, while critical access refers to the understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of employing technology for a given purpose (40-46). According to Banks, working toward a “transformative access” to change the systemic racism that creates the Digital Divide can be addressed only through a meaningful engagement with each dimension. Banks’ multifaceted definition of access allows him to argue for reasons why the Divide will still remain if only some dimensions are addressed.

Initiating a transformative access to close the Digital Divide proceeds through the “related axes of critique, use, and design” (132). The first few chapters of *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology* offer much in the spirit of critique, whether it is by way of exposing inequalities in systems of technology broadly defined, or examining how African American rhetors have confronted such inequalities. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 develop Banks’s argument that African American rhetoric can be more fully understood by focusing on the way they have employed communications technologies. Chapter 3 looks at speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to claim that each had the ability “to both manipulate individual technologies as part of their rhetorical mastery and bring a critical perspective to broader technological issues” (47). The chapter begins with an interesting analysis of Malcolm X’s rhetorical response to the way in which the producers of the television show “The Hate that Hate Produced” stacked the “rhetorical deck” to demonize him and limit his potential responses to interview questions. The chapter develops what Banks call “black digital ethos.” Such an ethos is marked, on the one hand, by Malcolm X’s understanding of when “users of the particular technology have to know both how to use and when to refuse any and all elements in that system,” and, on the other hand, by King’s understanding of when to employ technology to disrupt the status quo (61).
Chapter 4 analyzes how African American discursive practices can manifest themselves in online space. Working from the concept of the "underground," a rhetorical site where African Americans can develop discursive strategies of resistance, Banks’s description of a predominantly African American social networking site shows how users can make technology “relevant to their lives” (68). Banks documents the use of tonal semantics on the site to demonstrate how oral traditions are inscribed into online writing spaces. The chapter contributes to a growing body of online research that interrupts early theories of cyberspace, theories that suggested the concept of race would be irrelevant to online discourse. Although I am sympathetic to this argument, I found some claims about the site’s users perhaps too bold to be derived solely from textual research. Chapter 5 offers a close reading of Derrick Bell’s And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice to argue that the African American Jeremiad should be seen as a type of counter technology, a genre that functions as an instrument to expose the alleged neutrality and objectivity claimed by legal discourse (88). Focusing on a genre of writing as a technology may seem unusual, but Banks builds his case by claiming genres have technological functions because they “have important effects on the structures of the societies that use them,” and legal discourse “is both process and artifact, tool and shaper of society.” (90).

Chapter 6 initiates a shift from critiques of encoded racism in systems of technology to a concentration on designing more equitable technological systems, a “blind spot” in African American rhetorical studies (105). Focusing on the design of both African American architects and blanket quilters from the underground railroad, Banks looks at how design opens spaces for sites of collective action in the “continued pursuit of justice and inclusion” (130). Banks carries the emphasis on design into his final chapter, which revisits his notion of access in light of the preceding chapters, and makes recommendations for those in “search of higher ground,” those searching for a transformative access. The recommendations include slowly integrating technology into the classroom, only integrating the technology necessary for satisfying curricular goals, and in some cases yielding authority to the students (139-40). The chapter concludes with a two-page description of the ways in which Banks has integrated his conception of technology into coursework, and an agenda for African American rhetorical studies to follow to become more aware of the way technology is implicated in its history.

Readers wondering how to provide classroom space to foster transformative access may be disappointed with the cursory treatment of explicitly pedagogical material, especially given the book’s emphasis on the role of design in creating more equitable systems of technology. Such material is mostly relegated to the second half of the last chapter. But Banks’ book is a kind of Black Jeremiad, a “response” to the call of the genre’s history. We should thus keep in mind Banks’ description of those who write the genre: “Jeremiahs are the rhetorical demolition experts challenged to create space for dialogue . . . Given such a charge, it is difficult to ask those same individuals to then step into the space they’ve cleared and create new spaces, new technologies, even a new nation, as well” (108). Indeed, Banks opens space for dialogue by bringing two subfields of rhetoric and composition into a crucial conversation, subfields I hope grow more symbiotic as students bring different levels of technological savvy into our classrooms. Race, Rhetoric and Technology clears the intellectual space needed for us to recognize how racially charged systems of technology can be. As teachers the burden is on us to respond.

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Work Cited