

### **Access = Assimilation and Moral Degeneration?**

In rhetoric and composition studies, “race” and “technology” are generally studied and discussed separately. Although there are many varieties of technology (including mobile phones and televisions), in the context of education, technology is typically understood to be varieties of hardware, software and internet connections. The term “digital divide” traditionally refers to the gap between those with efficient, reliable access to technology and those without it. After 1990, this term was used by many people (such as President Clinton and Vice President Gore) in the context of education, usually referring to the need to help poor, rural, and/or minority students, who did not own a computer, gain “access.” Today, some composition and rhetoric scholars argue that there are no American college students who lack access to technology. This is true when we define “technology” as “computers and internet” and when we define “access” as “the ability to sit in front of a computer.” It is true that no American college student need search further than his or her local public library to find a free computer to sit at; however, when we consider the many forms of “access” that actually allow students to use technological equipment, such as the computer, to their educational advantage, such conviction is premature. The “digital divide” is not as easy to define today as it was in the 90s because of complex relationships between race, class, gender, education, and privilege. There have been quite a few published texts in composition studies that examine the intersections of race, class, and technology; many have suggested ways to help African American, Asian-American, Native American, and Latino/Latina students achieve additional access and improved access. However, there are no published academic texts that treat the access issues of Arab Americans in secondary or post-secondary education; in fact, Arab Americans are rarely, if ever, even mentioned in composition texts that discuss issues of

technological access of the “digital divide.” In yet another important academic conversation, the Arab and Arab American population of this country is an invisible minority, when reality confirms that the Arab cultural experience contributes to a less than enthusiastic viewpoint regarding the daily use of certain technologies as educational and/or social networking tools. Binary oppositions and antiquated cultural beliefs about worldliness imposed on Arab American women severely limit their access to technology, to rhetoric, and to education. While Arab and Arab American men rarely face the same cultural pressures to remain “pure” and “innocent” in their relationships with technology, they often cannot grasp the use of technology as an educational tool, which often hinders their success in a technology rich environment.

In *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground*, Adam Banks identifies that African Americans face limitations that restrict meaningful access to seemingly beneficial technological systems. Furthermore, Banks argues that the “digital divide” is a “rhetorical problem” (66), in which “material access,” for African Americans, is only the beginning (41). Even if this “material access” were to magically appear, Banks says “meaningful access” is still a long way away, especially for African Americans. Banks demonstrates that for African Americans to achieve meaningful uses of technology, they must additionally achieve “functional, experiential, critical, [and] transformative access” to technology (40-5). Banks says we must ask of our technologies the same questions that we have been asking about race and racism for years. Mainly, he promotes considering how African Americans, who are systematically excluded in many areas of education, can use technology, historical examples, and meaningful access to help themselves and their communities achieve positive changes today. In doing this, Banks outlines the many different ways to view access, which is also rather helpful when examining the limitations faced by

Arabs and Arab-Americans in the classroom. Banks says ultimately technology should be used to create a theoretically and rhetorically transformative space for causing positive social and political changes. To achieve this, Banks offers some new definitions of “access” to technology and he outlines these definitions in Chapter two, “Oakland, the Word, and the Divide: How We All Missed the Moment,” when he states that the “instruments people use to extend their power and comfort” are not the only kinds of technology. He says that technology also includes “the systems of knowledge [that] we must acquire [in order] to use any particular tool and [technology also includes] the networks of information, [and the] economic and power relations that enable that tool’s use” (40). Thus, technological access is much more than accessing goods for systematic use in a classroom; access is complicated and multifaceted and highly based on the students’ life experiences.

Banks defines “material” access as simply being near typical instruments of technology and having the physical ability to use them. He says “functional” access is having the skills to use them. “Experiential” access is the actual need to use these tools in the real world. “Critical” access is understanding and questioning the benefits and limitations of technology in a classroom/ in life and being able to question and critique its uses and misuses. And finally, Banks says “transformative” access is when students use these tools to create an environment of inclusion for marginalized groups and dialogue with each other as equals. Very few Arab American students are familiar with these different forms of access and very few would ever be rewarded by their parents or elder community members for achieving any or all of these types of technological access.

In “Arab American Femininities: Beyond Arab Virgin/American(ized) Whore”, Nadine Naber, an Arab American woman, anthropologist, and feminist, discusses the hardships faced

by Arab women living in America, especially those that are heavily influenced by their Arab parents' cultural values about modesty and morality and those that are heavily influenced by their parents' misconceptions about American women not being moral or modest. The women she discusses are first and/or second generation Arab Americans who struggle to negotiate feminist ideas about liberation and oppression with their Arab cultural values. Naber suggests that some Arab immigrant families employed a “selective assimilation strategy in which the preservation of Arab cultural identity and assimilation to American norms of “whiteness” were simultaneously desired” (88). Naber further asserts that this family strategy for assimilation lead to “a cultural nationalistic logic that represented the categories ‘Arab’ and ‘American’ in oppositional terms, such as ‘good Arab girls’ and ‘bad American(ized) girls’” (88). She says that “in bicultural Arab American familial and communal context[s]” Americans are often “referred to in derogatory sexualized terms;” contrastingly, Arabs are “referred to positively” and “associated with Arab family values and hospitality” (87). Clearly, these oppositions cause conflicts for young women growing up in America. While assimilation into American culture is coveted in some Arab communities today, preservation and assimilation cannot exist harmoniously in the lives of unmarried women, with strong ties to Arab culture, living in America because (a) the most prized status that these women can maintain in their Arab communities is that of an innocent, moral, virgin and (b) within Arab communities, American women are often viewed as immoral and promiscuous, so when a young Arab woman shows signs of effectively assimilating, she is immediately viewed with suspicion by her Arab community members and may be ostracized for acting “too American.”

While her article is not directly related to the ways Arabs view technology, it serves to articulate the world of binaries that Arab women are faced with, which does effect how they

view various technologies and “access” to it. In the Arab world, technology is viewed as a very Western entity. It is especially considered foreign by generations of Arab elders and by Arabs of all ages living in secluded areas and small villages in Arab countries. Naber’s article focuses on “the tense and often conflictual location of Arab American femininities at the intersections of two contradictory discourses: Arab cultural re-authenticity and hegemonic U.S. nationalism” (89). These two discourses contribute to the context from which Arab and Arab American women and men enter the Composition classroom in America; therefore, in addition to their personal experiences, their social and economic class, and their previous education, these discourses highly affect their perception of technology.

Sexual promiscuity is not considered liberating in any positive ways in Arab culture. Promiscuity is directly associated with freedom, and American ideals stress adulthood and freedom at age 18. Sexual liberation is also addressed in feminist rhetorics and the images projected by popular media. All of these concerns help to perpetuate a strongly held Arab cultural view of Americanization as demoralization and technology is a huge part of this because it is viewed in Arab culture as both unnecessary and overly liberating, especially for women. Often times a double standard exists between Arab men and women when it comes to technology. The world of technology is a man's world and women who venture to "that side" are viewed as "bad girls" at best. In Lebanon, where internet is scarce, and hardly present in the homes of the majority (typically lower class) population, female college students are forced to visit small "internet cafes" where they can hurriedly type their paper, print their research, or chat with a far-off relative, and then go back home before their reputation is too tarnished. Perhaps this sounds extreme; in some Arab countries, they are people who view technological access positively for both men and women, and as technology becomes more accessible to the

new generations in the big cities such as Beirut, more and more women are able to bring the internet into their homes; however, the internet cafes remain a place solely for men, especially after eight o'clock in the evening and because those men, who stay up into the wee hours of the morning, are hardly researching or typing homework, they perpetuate stereotypes that what is online is bad and that women couldn't possibly have a good reason to be using a computer.

Using the internet for homework is not nearly as common in Arab countries as it is in America. There is absolutely no place for Facebook, Second Life, Google groups, blogging or even Blackboard, in a university classroom in Lebanon. Most Lebanese, even those in Beirut (where there are over 40 universities), do not know what "blogging" is. Almost anyone who has an email address uses Hotmail or Yahoo. It is unheard of to be required to set up an email account at your university. College students cannot access their schedules online: not to make them, not to view them, or to change them. Facebook is a place for meeting people, and to many Lebanese, girls who want to meet people can only have immoral intentions. Lebanese men often justify their double standards with arguments such as: a woman who goes searching for companionship online could only have serious relationship problems in "the real world." And: she must not be getting everything she needs from her husband. Often times, when these men and women leave the high mountains for the big city, or leave Lebanon to come to America, they bring these antiquated cultural ideas with them. When they, or their children, attend a university in America, they often have severely limited access in many ways. First, they may not have material access at home: no computer and no internet. Second, they may not be familiar with technology. They are less likely, than their American counterparts, to have grown up with a computer in their home, so they are disadvantaged at an early stage in their careers. Often times, they need to learn how to drive and how to use a cellphone and other

common American technologies such as automated answering machines and automated customer service systems. Third, their experiential access is limited. They have rarely seen the internet being used in the real world, hardly see their parents or siblings using it, and often do not think it is necessary for success in life, in their education, or in their career. To them, it is mainly a mode of communication and entertainment, and not a necessary one. Fourth, if students do not see the benefits of technology and the limitations that it imposes on learning, they have not achieved critical access as Bank defines it. And lastly, Arab Americans, who desperately need to work toward positively changing the way they are viewed in America in a post 9-11 world, cannot achieve transformative access if they are hiding behind ancient binary oppositions that make technology into this immoral foreign entity. Without embracing technology and understanding its many uses, Arab Americans cannot and do not achieve great positive social change.

In her article entitled, “The ‘White’ Sheep of the Family: But Bleaching Is like Starvation,” Nada Elia says that even “those who write/speak out against invisibility... refuse to acknowledge [Arabs’] existence” and being “Arab-American... may be one of the very few instances where being hyphenated does not imply duality... but a lack of belonging on either side” (225) of the hyphen. Elia, like Naber, continuously refers to the conflicting sides of Arab American identity. If Middle Easterners are to be considered “white” by the government and by people of color and they are to be considered “non-white” by European whites, then they are categorically rendered invisible. Elia says, “it seems as if the existence of Arabs can only be tolerated as an entity outside of the xenophobic United States, always and only as foreigners” (229). For Arab women, this perplexing status is far more intense: Arab and Arab American women are often viewed as victims of Islam and victims of abuse and victims of female genital

mutilation. This identity is detrimental to their daily existence in America because to aspire to assimilate is to “deny” the culture (says the Arab community), and to preserve many Arab cultural values would mean to “deny” freedom (says the American mainstream). To disregard all of these issues in discussing technology in the writing classroom concerns me greatly. Arab Americans are truly the most under-represented U.S. minority group because even within discussions about minority groups they are continuously marginalized.

With his book, Banks begins an intensive conversation that reconstructs traditional African American uses of rhetoric as a use of technology for positive transformation of people and society, and he effectively demonstrates how this conversation can help African Americans today envision a better future and take an active role in creating that future. Many communities of color that differ racially from mainstream privileged white Americans are not discussed in *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground* and these communities could benefit greatly from a similar study. Arab Americans, who have often been neglected in essays and books about the role of technology, would benefit greatly from further scholarship. They should research; they should be researched; and they should read the research. In the last chapter of his book, “The Digital Jeremiad in Search of Higher Ground: Transforming Technologies, Transforming a Nation,” Banks puts forward the notion of “soul,” which he describes as “the ability to recognize complexity and still pursue unity... [ultimately, for] a larger job of transformation... [of] old racist exclusions” (134). He asks that we have “hope for the future” and he calls for teachers to incorporate this “soul” into the classroom, to not “be scared of recreational uses of technolog[y,]” and to no longer “produce customers”(140). Banks is right. Teachers and students should look to technology for help in transforming their communities and each others’ communities. Technology can ease the struggle, change the

views of the mainstream and just help Arab Americans gain positive exposure to Americanness and help Americans gain positive exposure to Arabness. As Samantha Blackmon says in her article entitled, “But I’m Just ‘White’ or How ‘Other’ Pedagogies Can Benefit All Students,” all students can benefit from incorporating the interrogation of various racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, regional, and religious discourse communities. Ideally, students, researchers, and professionals should realize that “access” to technology, especially for Arab Americans and members of other historically under-represented groups, is much more than just sitting at a computer with internet access.

## Works Cited

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