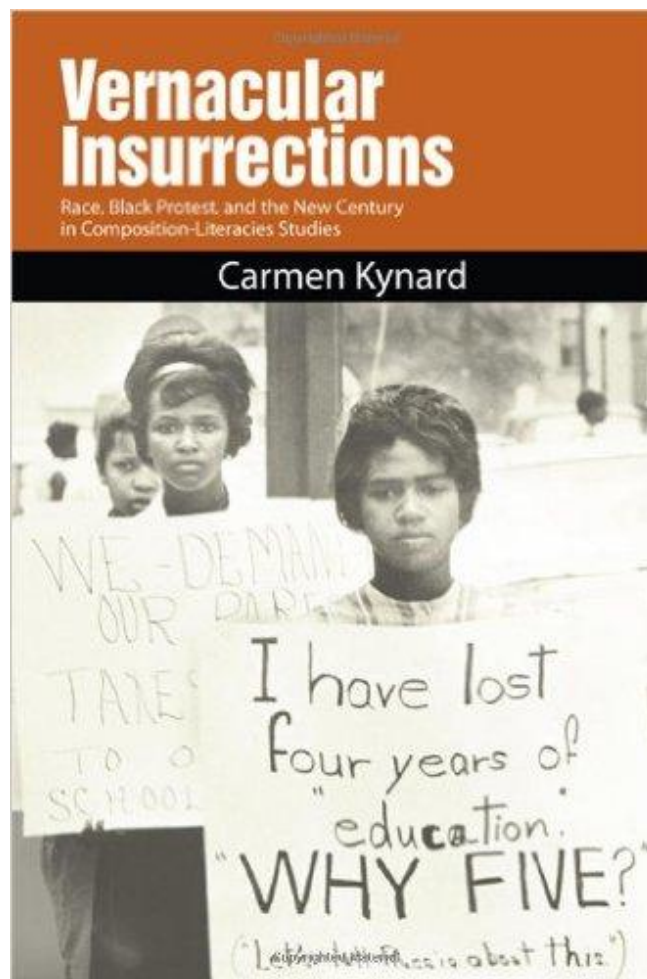


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review:  
Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the  
New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies  
by Carmen Kynard

Reviewed by Ted Hall



**Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies (State University of New York Press, 2013) by Carmen Kynard**

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*Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies* is a masterful study of race, literacy, rhetoric, and composition that deserves the widest readership. Building on four decades of scholarship that reexamines the student-led, Black Protest phase of the 1960s movements, *Vernacular Insurrections* underscores the critical role of Black student organizations and the Black Arts Movement in the development of African American literacies, rhetorics, and resistance.

***A century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois redefined the social sciences as a discipline. Du Bois's scholarship challenged the idea that Black people are a problem people. Instead, his analysis positioned Black people as facing systemic problems as a result of America's color line.***

*Vernacular Insurrections* has benefited from a growing body of scholarship on African American literacies and rhetorics. In many aspects, previous and existing scholarship on African American rhetorics has neglected to situate composition and literacies studies historically within larger geopolitical protests movements. Many contemporary literacy and composition scholars have been preoccupied with establishing the linguistic legitimacy of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), while providing scant attention to the identity politics surrounding its emergence as a field. However, *Vernacular Insurrections* provides a sociopolitical and historical context for scholars to understand the formation of composition and rhetorics for African Americans within the larger struggle of resistance and Black liberation.

Dr. Kynard begins *Vernacular Insurrections* with an important critique of American universities and K-12 schools, which "through their scholarship and instructional designs, have often upheld a racial status quo alongside a rhetoric of dismantling it. These [are] not the workings of contradictory and confused individuals merely locked within their space and time. My grandmother understood such contradictions . . . as 'runnin' with the rabbits and 'huntin' with the dogs,'" Kynard writes. Dr. Kynard invokes her grandmother's epistemological framework throughout the text to "achieve an alternative awareness, ideological approach, and set of cultural practices" (19). Her

grandmother's quote signifies an important distinction of *Vernacular Insurrections* within literacy and composition studies.

*Vernacular Insurrections* is critical of interventionist-based pedagogical models that position urban students as in need of "prescriptive, skills-based instruction" (4) for the singular purpose of acquiring literacy for integration. Composition and literacy studies have a long history of using deficit models that render invisible the Black and Latina rhetorics and literacies. *Vernacular Insurrections*, instead, offers a historical analysis that makes explicit the importance of pedagogical strategies and theoretical constructs that imagine urban students as living heirs to dynamically linked rhetorics and literacies. Therefore, composition and literacy studies are faced with the disciplinary imperative to become an inclusive "design" space for textual production that acknowledges the epistemic identities that urban students bring to classrooms to address the color line. Thus, *Vernacular Insurrections* highlights the racial politics and subjective ideologies framing composition and literacy studies, and offers a critical lens to reinterpret these politics through a Black Freedom Movement lens.

A century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois redefined the social sciences as a discipline. Du Bois's scholarship challenged the idea that Black people are a problem people. Instead, his analysis positioned Black people as facing systemic problems as a result of America's color line. Similarly, the early Chicano Studies and Indigenous and Black programs at universities like Cornell and San Francisco State were created in response to the whitewashing of race within universities and the traditional disciplines. These programs served as intellectual counter-cultural spaces for knowledge production based on the epistemic identities of the participants in grassroots movements that produced them. In fact, many progressive public intellectuals of color outside of the academy viewed university-based trained scholars as co-conspirators in knowledge production that advanced the racial domination of Brown and Black people globally.

More recently, Robin Kelley and others have referred to the Black Radical Imagination as a part of the intellectual legacy that emerged from the 1960s critical ethnic studies programs. Similar to that of Du Bois, scholarship by philosophers Sylvia Wynter and Lewis Gordon makes explicit the decadence of the western canon and its disciplinary obsolescence within higher education. Similarly, Fanon's scholarship "ruptured the present

knowledge system that all academic disciplines serve to maintain, by calling into question our present culture's purely biological definition of what it is to be, and therefore of what it is like to be, human" (Wynter 2001: 31). This radical rupture that the Black Radical Imagination caused creates the space; *Vernacular Insurrections* enters that space, which moves the disciplines out of their present Western/European/Masculinized conception of composition and rhetoric, beyond the Self and Other dialectic, toward an epistemic decolonized conception that needs no Other to understand Self.

***Vernacular Insurrections invites the voices of Black and Latino youth through interludes before each chapter. From a methodological perspective, the interludes are critical to the book's success.***

Dr. Kynard, in challenging disciplinary knowledge, critically interrogates the White male-centric master narratives within literacy and composition studies that position European/Western knowledge production as universal and ethnic-based knowledge production as particularity. The book makes clear the intersections of race, gender, and social class in the texts students create, and the ways that composition teachers analyze those texts. It's all about the way power is asymmetrically distributed in classrooms based upon a narrow set of established normative canons and rhetorics. Scholars and practitioners, then, in the fields of literacy, composition, and rhetorics decide on seminal texts "marked as progressive," which often are read uncritically in graduate schools. Hence, "huntin with the rabbits and runnin with the dogs."

*Vernacular Insurrections* invites the voices of Black and Latino youth through interludes before each chapter. From a methodological perspective, the interludes are critical to the book's success. First, the student interludes are qualitatively rich data that provide insights into their gendered and racial rhetorics as they relate to popular culture. Second, the interludes position students as writers connected to various African Diaspora speech communities beyond the local. Finally, perhaps most importantly, unlike many Marxist composition and literacy scholars, who link revolutionary change to the middle class, Black and Latino students are positioned as the most critical agents in articulating a rhetoric of revolution and transforming their conditions inside the classroom.

*Vernacular Insurrections* makes important contributions toward feminist scholarship in that Dr. Kynard utilizes theory and builds theory from a critical feminist standpoint. Critical feminist perspectives continue to face forms of resistance within the disciplines, with the exception of gender studies. Perhaps an equally important

radical goal of *Vernacular Insurrections* is to reconstitute the ideology, and practices, of composition-rhetoric as a discipline, not to erase the history dogmatically, or at all. Instead, *Vernacular Insurrections* enables a broader set of epistemic knowledge to emerge within the discipline. It demonstrates that no serious discussion around the achievement gap can happen without decolonizing the literacy and composition classroom. Furthermore, Dr. Kynard's work advocates for language rights for all. *Vernacular Insurrections* will no doubt find an audience beyond the margins of composition, literacy, and rhetoric. Dr. Kynard's work will find other interlocutors in critical ethnic studies, critical feminist studies, and critical language studies. *Vernacular Insurrections* will be right at home and connected to a larger sociopolitical movement, which views scholarship as connected to the empowerment of local communities. Additionally, *Vernacular Insurrections*, perhaps, will be canonized among language rights activists and third world feminist scholars who view as essential role that language and culture play in identity formation. The Black Arts Movement represented Black cultural productions in the best of the Black Vernacular tradition.



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