

Race, Language Policy, and Silence in Composition Studies

Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition Studies, by Carmen Kynard. Albany: SUNY P, 2013. 322 pp.

Shaping Language Policy in the U.S.: The Role of Composition Studies, by Scott Wible. Carbondale: SIUP, 2013. 232 pp.

A Search Past Silence: The Literacy of Young Men, by David E. Kirkland. New York: Columbia UP, 2013. 187 pp.

Reviewed by David F. Green, Jr., Howard University

I recall a conversation I had with a few grad students last semester about reimagining the roles of race and power in academe from a position of possibility instead of precedent. At the heart of our conversation was my desire to apply pressure to their expectations of what English studies entails, and more specifically their ways of thinking about the standard-nonstandard English dichotomy. Our conversation reached a stalemate as they voiced their view that learning the language of power remains at the center of English studies and I my view that critical language awareness requires educators of the language arts to think differently about the circumstances that may shape a given language performance or view of communication. In many ways the students were right, as standardized written English still remains revered as the language of power within academe among many professors and still serves as a gate-keeping mechanism students must be mindful of or risk exclusion. But as many now recognize, this is not solely the case. Concepts such as code-meshing, code-mixing, translingualism, and transcultural literacies represent ways of thinking about the nuanced languages and dialects that intersperse with and enhance the prose of writers. Linguistic diversity has become a central concept in thinking about the possibilities embedded in the ways people make and understand meaning. I think my conversation with the grad students would have benefited considerably from an engagement with a trio of recent texts dealing with this very issue. Though these works were not included in the course reading list, their attention to language, race, and power provide fertile ground for graduate students and professionals seeking to enhance their understanding of composition history and culturally relevant language pedagogy. More specifically, I would argue that these texts make a clear case for the importance of critical language awareness and transcultural literacy for twenty-first-century writing instruction. As each text illustrates, composition histories, linguistic identities, and social justice legacies are not only central to

composition studies as a field, but to the very lives and livelihoods shaped by what this field has come to mean both within and beyond academe.

Of these works, Carmen Kynard's *Vernacular Insurrections* provides the most extensive and comprehensive analysis and is the work with which I begin. Kynard makes a strikingly refreshing case for the relevance of Black freedom struggles to composition histories. Her work is an ambitious compendium of historical critique, teacher narrative, and critical literacy research. Kynard proves herself a deft historian, and the connections she is able to make between the Black freedom struggle tradition and the field of composition and rhetoric are imaginative, insightful, and sharp. Her narrative voice exemplifies a critical and flexible relationship with Black English from which current research on language and writing could benefit. She employs tropes, testimonials, and critical language that identify her as a quintessential "script-flipper" working in the intellectual traditions of Geneva Smitherman, Jacqueline Royster, and many others. By script-flipper, I am referring to her use of African American English, which flows seamlessly with and against the critical prose used to ground the main ideas of the text. Her text does not always mesh academic and nonacademic language varieties, which in some cases is refreshing, as her multivocality highlights her disagreement with some of the histories and scholarship she engages. *Vernacular Insurrections* marries the Black freedom struggle to composition literacies in ways that place the Black social protest tradition at the center of critical literacy and composition studies. Kynard defines composition literacies as the ongoing analysis of ways that student bodies are validated or invalidated by the ways they choose to move through higher education curricula and by the types of composing practices they bring with them to this space (8-9). The text takes its title from a term coined by Kynard, "vernacular insurrections." She describes the concept as selective interventions in the oppressive conditions of institutions and the dominant culture (11). These interventions are vernacular in the sense that they occur through the production of disruptive discourses that affirm identities, cultures, and histories outside of the dominant discourse. As Kynard understands, the Black protest tradition, like Black America, is variegated, complex, and influenced by a variety of ideologies and theories that produce different dispositions toward the dominant culture.

In terms of influences, Kynard's work owes much to Robin D. G. Kelley and Geneva Smitherman. The feel, language, and flow of the text combines a black vernacular approach with a historiographic examination of progressive Black freedom struggles and composition history. Kynard's project takes flight through its discussion of critical language pedagogy and marginalized student identities. These subjects, often relegated to the fringes of composition histories, inform Kynard's vision of the modern university and modern

composition studies, which in turn provides the exigence for the study. As she notes of her project,

At its heart, I am attempting to write a self-conscious and personal black vernacular history as a compositionist and critical literacies educator who works hard to think and teach from the vantage point of Black Radical traditions as more than just curricular content delivered in Eurocentric modes. (18)

It is here that I see this work as the progressive vision for language research many have advocated for in this journal and other spaces. Contemporary language pedagogies of any pluralistic variety benefit from considerations of language that sidestep the privileging of purely Eurocentric modes and decades-old ways of thinking on language education. For Kynard that begins by reasserting the relevance of Black protest traditions to language policy research within CCCC, open admissions and basic writing histories, and critical pedagogy.

Kynard's book is organized into five main chapters bookended by a formal introduction and an outerlude, with five teacherludes interspersed between the formal chapters. While I have often used "mixtape" as a way of getting students to think differently about the texts they read and write about in class, Kynard presents, by my account, the first intellectual mixtape monograph. In hip-hop music the mixtape has historically served as an unconventional collection of remixed, unreleased, or original music. Unlike commercially released albums, mixtapes usually target audiences invested in experimentation and playful and critical thought. Similar to the variety of music offered on mixtapes, Kynard uses the teacherludes to provide "a kind of parallel-story to the impact of the histories" presented in the work (13). I found many of the narratives intriguing and compelling, as well as more suggestive and introspective than the main chapters. In many instances I was reminded of my own experiences teaching linguistically diverse students in my former position in a Norfolk, Virginia middle school. More than anything, each teacherlude highlights the type of reflective analysis found in much of the critical race work of Derrick Bell and other critical race theorists. Her ability to mesh a narrative approach with insights into how this might apply to composition pedagogy writ large added another layer and flavor to the entire work.

The five main chapters explore a number of topics related to the Black freedom struggle and composition studies. Kynard begins with a review of the Black student protests at HBCUs beginning in the 1920s and occurring well into the 1960s. She connects this tradition of protest to the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (SRTOL) document and implies that the study of

such history can be vital to understanding the document and redressing the roots of deficit pedagogies. As she argues, the inability to see SRTOL and other critical statements on language as connected to a Black protest tradition reinforces troubling assumptions about the spirit of these documents. These statements began with the idea of empowering students who spoke a number of language varieties and of acknowledging the resistance teachers might encounter from students who value the intellectual traditions of their cultures and neighborhoods. In other words, these statements were written for the very working-class and minority students often written out of the dominant histories of composition.

Later in her work, Kynard contends that the Black Power movement informed many of the concerns, interests, and works of black scholars in the field of composition. She does this by tracing the history of the NCTE/CCCC black Caucus and the work that came from members of the caucus. In the chapter "I Want to Be African," Kynard further elaborates on the connection between the black Caucus and the Black Arts Movement (BAM) by challenging Steve Parks' critique of Smitherman in *Class Politics*. According to Kynard, Parks critiques Smitherman's work with Black English and its relationship to the radical class critique of the Black Power movement (83). For Parks, Smitherman's works favor an ethnic-centered paradigm instead of a radical leftist paradigm. While critiques of Parks' misreading of Smitherman's work can also be found in essays such as Keith Gilyard's "Holdin it Down," Kynard provides a nuanced, at times comical, but more than fair analysis of the strengths and missteps of Parks' reading of the Black protest movement and Smitherman's work with Black English. As Kynard notes, several of Smitherman's writings spoke directly to the Black aesthetic movement, the sister movement of the Black Power movement that examined aesthetic production as a vehicle and resource for political action (83).

Kynard concludes the main body of her book with a close look at the role of the black freedom struggles in basic writing histories. Acutely aware of Mina Shaughnessy's legacy, Kynard goes to great lengths to highlight some ways the foundational *Errors and Expectations* has contributed to a misguided focus on the errors of urban minority students at the expense of much more critical views of the legacies and circumstances shaping these students' entrance into academe. For Kynard, Shaughnessy's *Errors* does provide an important analysis of the patterns and reasoning of student writing examined in her classes, and because it represents a foundational text (in fact, one used to introduce Kynard to teaching composition at an open admissions college), its politics become very important to consider in what it conveys about teaching large minority student populations. The thrust of Kynard's rereading of *Errors* is to suggest that there are alternative visions that express a more radical vision of teaching

for social justice with large urban minority populations. She presses for a more expansive vision of composition studies, one that eschews centers and margins in favor of social change and empowerment. For her this begins with newer (or rather, older) history lessons in language, protest, and composition instruction.

Scott Wible's *Shaping Language Policy in the U.S.* is an interesting and compelling companion to Kynard's text, though it is less ambitious in scope and less experimental in form. His work is particularly interesting given the recent rise of research interrogating code-switching, code-meshing, and translanguaging as practical responses to the increased presence of linguistic diversity in composition classrooms. Wible's text focuses on language policy statements and the troubling conversations surrounding them.

More specifically, *Shaping Language Policy in the U.S.* takes as its focus the history and development of three language policy statements and their larger influence on national perspectives about language. Wible frames his project around the rise of linguistic conservatism and its dominating influence on the reception of language concerns within education during and after the Ronald Reagan administration. As Wible notes, the Reagan era of politics brought with it a sweeping resistance to multicultural educational programs and a misguided conception of nationalism linked uncritically to language education. In this interesting examination of the SRTOL resolution, the NCTE/CCCC National Language Policy (NLP), and the Department of Defense's National Security Language Policy (NSLP), Wible brings together archival research, textual analysis, and personal interviews to "illuminate how beliefs and attitudes toward language influence public demand for or resistance to various language policy texts" (15). He draws on the SRTOL resolution and the NLP as touchstones for the push-pull relationship that continues to define attitudes toward linguistic diversity within the U.S.

With clear and balanced prose, Wible makes the case for recognizing linguistic diversity as both a political and intellectual concern, one that continues to shape how the American public and American educational organizations such as CCCC interpret, address, and engage linguistic diversity. The body chapters are developed around the SRTOL, NLP, and the Department of Defense's NSLP documents. In the first body chapter, Wible complicates perspectives on the SRTOL resolution by presenting a nuanced review of the Language Curriculum Research Group's (LCRG) attempt to develop curricula and practices based on SRTOL recommendations. Wible uses the case of LCRG's failed attempt to publish a textbook developed around linguistically diverse principles as evidence of the growing English-only movement and of the conflicted views in the field of composition as a whole on linguistic diversity. He goes to great lengths to present the LCRG as a transformative group working to provide concrete classroom practices built on the SRTOL. His strongest

evidence of this stems from a grant awarded to the LCRG by the Ford Foundation to complete a textbook manuscript that blends sociolinguistic research with composition practice and focuses on making Black English Vernacular legible to composition teachers working in the CUNY system. Yet, the book would never see publication, derailed by the public animus toward bilingual and multilingual language instruction.

Wible's project gathers force through its exploration of policy, public opinion, and CCCC's vested interest in making political and intellectual statements about language and cultural difference. As Wible shows, for many within the organization, linguistic diversity came to represent either a harbinger of impending loss of standards or a central vehicle for democratic education. Wible explains, "the National Language Policy asked compositionists to see themselves not only as scholars and teachers but also as citizens who could provide greater leadership in public debates about language policy and linguistic diversity" (71). Wible then moves on to review the NSLP, which he carefully explores as a conservative response to the tragic reality of 9/11 and broadening concerns about national security. As he aptly notes, the NSLP defines the need for multilingualism very narrowly, preserving an English-only position toward language education, unless the acquisition of a particular language can enhance one's ability to communicate with communities that pose threats to national security. As noted, such a position reinforces American jingoism at its worst and undermines progressive visions of composition studies. Wible concludes his work with a request for response statements from the rhetoric and composition communities that outline the importance of linguistic diversity to education, particularly within an increasingly global culture and economy.

Much like his central argument—that language policies matter because they identify the political and public positions groups and individuals take regarding education and teaching—Wible's text oscillates evenly between historical context and rhetorical analysis, and this is what I found to be both the strength and weakness of the text. For those interested in language diversity and research on SRTOL and other language policies, the book adds another resource to that history. However, at times, *Shaping Language Policy* is too careful in its analysis of particular case studies. Wible takes care to present, organize, and situate the particular policy statements he examines, yet he retreats from suggesting too forcefully how these statements might be reinterpreted for our modern concerns. I understand this was not the focus of his project, but given the detailed and meticulous way he delivers his research, I found myself looking for more vigorous conclusions or comments about the historical work provided.

One might also expect a more robust discussion of later statements such as the "CCCC Statement on Ebonics" or the "CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers," but these statements remain absent for the

most part. Still, Wible's work is impressive in its nuance and detail, balanced in its analysis and prose style, and should be required reading for anyone seriously invested in language policy or critical language studies in composition.

Although Kynard and Wible highlight missing elements of language analysis in traditional composition histories, their interests and arguments remain largely conceptual and focused on sharpening alternate histories of composition. Kynard provides glimpses of the student identities most affected by oppressive attitudes toward language, David Kirkland's *A Search Past Silence* provides a passionate and empathetic defense of these identities. A moving and powerful ethnographic study of four black male students in Lansing, Michigan and the literacies that shaped their lives and relationships, Kirkland's study explores what rights to one's own language means for people whose identities often are dismissed before they utter one word. In his composition literacies study, Kirkland seeks to move beyond the narrow labeling of these four male students to gather a holistic and deeper understanding of the language and meaning making practices that shape their lives, as well as the systematic academic and nonacademic institutions that impede their progress. He, like Kynard, assumes that awareness of the sociocultural literacy practices of these students will yield a more sophisticated understanding for teachers of language and literacy.

Kirkland's work is organized into sixteen short chapters, written in an engaging third-person narrative style. The chapters fit within three larger units entitled language, silence, and identity. Each chapter is organized around a linguistic or cultural concept—such as syntax, cypha, or poverty—and these concepts serve as backdrops to the narratives told in the chapters. The chapters cycle between individual narratives featuring one of the four young men and their experiences writing poetry, developing raps, getting into fist fights, and negotiating the complex dynamics of poverty and family. Many of the chapters include the voices and perspectives of all four young men, but the focus usually revolves around an event relevant to one of them. Kirkland also takes us into the classroom with the young men, capturing the sentiments of a teacher who has given up on him.

Kirkland makes a concerted effort to place the experiences of these young men and their language, music, and families in conversation with scholarly research. However, he remains careful to let the young men lead this conversation, subordinating the scholarship to their experiences. For example, the concept of the cypha, a literal circle of voices, serves as a dominant framing metaphor throughout the book, highlighting the interactions between the young men and the collaborative function of their meaning making activities. Kirkland draws on H. Samy Alim—a noted hip-hop language scholar—but only to define and explain the concept before ushering him out the way and allowing the young men's interactions to illustrate this concept.

As the title denotes and as Kirkland is careful to illustrate, these young men tend to be silenced by institutions, teachers, and law enforcement in ways Kirkland does not seek to duplicate. In the silencing process, the literate abilities and brilliant potential of these young men are written over in ways that rewrite them as criminal, delinquent, illiterate, and dropouts. As the study shows, these young men are constantly composing raps, journal entries, or artistic drawings that help them make sense of the world they occupy and reveal to readers their brilliant young minds. Ironically, very little of this writing is acknowledged in school or out. For example, one of the young men is viciously assaulted and arrested for disorderly conduct after refusing to leave school grounds when prompted by hyper-vigilant police officers. The officers interrupted a rap cypha the young men were participating in, which demonstrates their own lack of understanding of the positive attributes of hip-hop literacy. The inability of the officers to see what the young men were doing as meaningful created a series of events that contributed as much to the young man's assault and arrest as his decision not to move on quietly. One might read this as an example of the young men's inability to negotiate the codes of power shaping their experience. Yet, it is clear the young men understand very well the literate practices of institutions, state agents, teachers, and many others. They are well aware of their vulnerability, invisibility, and powerlessness, and this is why their literacy practices should be valued: as Kirkland so poignantly shows us, such practices provide them with a means of resistance and cultural empowerment in response to their troubled experiences. Kirkland's book does a beautiful job demonstrating the type of work and literate practices that can make these young men and others like them visible. One can only imagine how different approaches to teaching writing might look if body art, dance compositions, and raps were much more readily incorporated into mainstream composition pedagogy.

A Search Past Silence is a striking monograph-length literacy narrative featuring four young men from Michigan. Kirkland's work in form and theory posits interesting possibilities for language and difference within composition studies. Our field would greatly benefit from more work willing to subordinate traditional academic literacies for more culturally nuanced narratives of composition literacy.

Taken together, *Vernacular Insurrections, Shaping Language Policy in the U.S.*, and *A Search Past Silence* add a political edge to recent discussions of language and the rising global interest in transcultural composition studies. At a fundamental level each text asks the question "what can be gained by thinking differently about what political, racialized discourses can offer the teaching of writing?" As each text resoundingly notes, much can be gained if we broaden our view of the past and of our students' literate assets. As newer

studies press for newer insights into linguistic pluralism—conceptions that move away from a center-periphery model of language use—it becomes equally important to remember that linguistic swagger is a central component of rhetorical sophistication and cross-cultural communication. As each text presses, let us not forget that expressive resources like hip-hop spread Black English across the globe because they serve a rhetorical role in illustrating particular injustices, not simply because they are provocative. Thus, Black English does not serve simply as cultural affirmation, but as a model for how different language practices can be mobilized and used to rethink assumptions about links between writing and social change. Collectively, these authors provide important interventions in the dominant discourses that silence substantive discussion of linguistic and cultural difference in the teaching of writing. While conversations about translingualism, language diversity, and academic culture will continue to grow moving us toward greater global critical language awareness, for Kynard, Wible, and Kirkland their monographs already meet this demand with much swagger and flow.

Washington, D.C.

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