

Critical Literacies

The 1970s and 1980s involved major changes and epoch shifts, not just in terms of our understandings of and practices in literacy, but also in terms of the opening up of society as traditional power structures were being interrogated and challenged. As Marxist views, feminism, and liberatory pedagogy (especially as envisioned by Brazilian Paulo Freire) gained traction and gathered momentum, the literacy field turned the lens on itself. In so doing, it exposed its own gender bias favoring the perspectives of white males, its racial and ethnic biases against minorities (especially non-English speakers), its epistemological preference for positivism, and its lack of support for teacher professionalism, to name a few.

Some Background on the Roots and Development of Critical Theory

In many ways, the history of critical theory might be traced to a long history of progressive educators identifying the social transformative values of education for society, or to that of advocates for historically disenfranchised persons. In the modern period, critical theory mostly corresponds with the advent of sociology as a field of study and the developments/shifts that occurred as a result, especially in the postcolonial period (Side Comment III.5b.1).

Side Comment III.5b.1.

Shifting Thrust of Sociology

Sociology is a social science that uses various methods of empirical investigation and critical analysis to study society, social interactions, relations and culture, especially critically and in terms of social order and social change. The sociology of education has not been a fixed discipline; it has shifted and adopted different frames as different critiques have emerged, often fusing with what once would have been considered separate disciplines such as history, philosophy, social psychology and geography. Essentially, sociology has broadly focused upon critique and redemption, but those critiques have shifted in orientation or turned as questions regarding the paradigms enlisted, foci and standpoint have arisen. Arguably, western scholars have tended to dominate fields of sociology—although developments rooted in other traditions exist across north and south east and west.

Laying out developments is therefore useful as long as one understands there is seepage from one tradition to another as well as a kind of turnaround (as if sociology in its various incarnations are not displaced but often fused).

For instance, perhaps spurred by the call for evidence-based and more fixed findings by policy makers, one of the foundational orientations for sociology (especially in the U.S.) has been empirical. These include efforts to objectify—by measurement and observation—issues such as social stratification and mobility, and efforts to relate social origin determinants to educational attainment. In the 1960s, an empirical orientation was linked to matters of equity, as seen in the work of James Coleman. Identifying himself as a mathematical sociologist, Coleman and his collaborators explored issues of equity in schools by comparing private and public school students on achievement measures (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, & Weinfeld, 1966). In terms of bringing to the fore racial considerations, John Ogbu's analyses of the experiences of African American students was a precursor to critical race theory (Ogbu, 1984; 1992). And in literacy, among the more foundational work were the ethnographically-based studies of Shirley Brice Heath (1983), Victoria Purcell Gates (1995) and others who focused on linguistic variability.

Despite the significance of these endeavors, what became viewed as the New Sociology of Education represented a turn that challenged the frames and paradigms that were enlisted. French sociologists drawing on Marxism such as Foucault and Bourdieu and British sociologists such as Bernstein brought major epistemological differences despite efforts by some to fuse the two (e.g., the research by Paul Willis that applied a combination of frames from a somewhat empirical tradition as well as a Marxist tradition). The critical tradition in particular tended to fuse together critical tools with interactionist perspectives and issues related to the sociology of knowledge and power structures in a fashion that was multi-purpose. There were a number of proponents of this tradition in the U.S. (e.g., Apple, 1979; Giroux; McLaren, 1989) and South America, (e.g. Freire, Torres) along with others located in Australia, Canada and the U.K. (e.g., Davies, 1982; Luke, 1997; Whitty).

Thus, there was a key shift that foreshadowed the emergence of standpoint theory in sociology that focused on unmasking the disposition, orientation, and presuppositions of the observer, researcher or theorist and the influence of what is observed or studied, how it is interpreted, etc. Propelled by the rise of feminism with a range of orientations and approaches and other issues related to social identities, this shift questioned the nature of the scholarly practice and its authority in ways that challenged the tendencies to

essentialize others. It brought to the fore multiplicative possibilities in ways that foreshadowed and propelled post modernism and, in recent years, the trans-orientation—befitting plurality rather than singular and fixed meanings. Scholars such as Patti Lather (1986) were among those that advanced these notions. More recently, it has been extended by race-based theorists, Indigenous scholars and others.

Critical Theory and Subsequent Developments. Essentially, critical theory and sociology draw from various fields such as history, political science, cultural studies, sociolinguistics, and philology, and includes a range of theoretical lenses, including post-colonial critiques, poststructuralism, feminism, and others. Though critical theory might have antecedents throughout history, the most recent incarnations can be traced to scholars connected with the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Frankfurt (referred to as the Frankfurt School). The Frankfurt School, which had its beginnings in the 1920s, went into exile to the U.S. in World War II—affiliating itself with Columbia University. The School, rooted in Marxism (see Engels, 1969; Marx, 2000; Marx & Engels, 1975-76) and Hegel’s work (see Hegel, 2015), focused on a dialectal orientation and built on Habermas’ (1987) work on communicative reason and critiques of positivism, materialism, and determinism. Initially, the Frankfurt School strived to unmask the connections between power and knowledge—specifically, by challenging the power of positivist research in its instrumentality and reasoning (i.e., the separation of facts from values and avoidance of human consciousness) and questioning the failure of science to connect theory and policy to everyday life or concern itself with society’s betterment.

Developments in other countries have also been quite influential:

- In France, a number of scholars focused upon the subjugation by social institutions enlisted a mix of methods and frames from linguistics, philosophy and history. Among the most influential was Pierre Bourdieu (1991), whose theories addressed issues of power and subjugation—that is, how symbolic dimensions of domination engage in ways that mask their cultural, social, economic realities. Michel Foucault’s (1989; 1995) closer examinations of power deemed these dimensions more fragmented, localized and more nuanced across institutions. These and other French critical theorists, philosophers, and sociologists (e.g., Deleuze, 1994) spurred further developments by social theorists throughout the world.

- In the U.K., the work on language and social class by Basil Bernstein (1977) at the University of London and the creation of the Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies in 1964 at the University of Birmingham contributed to a range of studies examining social issues and race (e.g. Stuart Hall, 2017), including complex issues of reproduction, resistance, positioning and agency with regard to social class (e.g., Paul Willis, 1977).
- Critical theory, especially when applied to schooling and literacy, had powerful South American antecedents with the literacy campaigns in Cuba and Nicaragua and the influence of Paulo Freire's liberation pedagogy. Appearing in the 1970s, the pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1995/1970) and his colleagues (e.g. Boal, 1979) was a major catalyst for both critiques of and challenges to oppression within schooling contexts, pointing to illiteracy as a means of subordination and maintaining inequities. Freire (1995/1970) recognized that literacy involves a mix of *reading the word* and *reading the world*. His view of literacy was tied to notions of liberation and participation, as opposed to oppression and marginalization. Accordingly, Freire (1995/1970) defined literacy as a process of conscientização, or consciousness, connecting reading to the world for purposes of empowerment. As Freire (1995/1970) stated, "Literacy makes sense only in these terms, as the consequence of men beginning to reflect about their capacity for reflection, about the world, about their position in the world, about the encounter of consciousness" (p. 106).
- In North America, several American sociologists, philosophers, cultural studies scholars and educators enlisted the theoretical underpinnings of Marxist theorists, French sociologists, South American scholars together with American philosopher, John Dewey in their critical social critiques and arguments for egalitarian approaches to educational developments. These critical analyses began to gather a great deal of synergy beginning in the 1980's with Michael Apple (1979; 1988; 2012), Thomas Popkewitz (1984), Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren (1989; 2000); Lankshear & McLaren, 1993), Ira Shor (1980; 1987), Henry Macedo (Freire & Macedo, 1987), Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989), bell hooks (1994) and numerous other scholars who drew upon a combination of French, German (especially Marxist), and American philosophers, British sociologists, and Freirean concepts in their analyses of educational matters (and, in Canada and the U.S., in some of their proposals for

educational change). Their analyses reflected the goal to understand power and challenge hegemony.

- In Africa, a number of scholars focused upon the western impact (through colonization) on African epistemologies, languages, and education. Building on the work of Thiong'o (1986), there has been an interest in rekindling African ways of knowing (e.g., Ubuntu), as well as applying cultural and sociological analyses to African suppression and development (e.g., Assié-Lumumba, 2016; Wright & Abdi, 2012; Rabaka, 2009).
- In Australia, critical theory gained a fertile foothold stemming from its history of racism, sexism and classism and aligning with a rise in consciousness about prejudice, inequities experienced by and activism from Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Specifically, it was propelled by the growth of socialism in the 70s, by some of the social movements arising in the same period (i.e., anti-war in Vietnam protests, feminism, and campaigns for Aboriginal rights), and by the scholarly initiatives of clusters of critical sociologists (e.g., Raewyn Connell) and feminist scholars (e.g., Bronwyn Davies, Pamela Gilbert, Carol Baker, Carmen Luke) across Australia but most notably at Deakin University and James Cook University. A number of critical theorists in Australia were particularly engaged in exploring issues of gender representation and protocols to advance critical analyses that students at all levels might do.¹ In addition, under the guidance of Michael Halliday who moved from the United Kingdom to Australia as Chair of Linguistics at the University of Sydney, functional systemic linguistics rooted in socio-political considerations, contributed to socio-political analyses of text including a movement that was labelled genres of power (Halliday, 1985; Hasan, 1978). A genre approach was advocated as addressing the needs of students in terms of essential genres that were deemed likely to be neglected with approaches to text that emphasized narrative forms especially in concert with a process writing emphasis Christie, 1985; Martin, 1985).
- In other parts of the world, critical movements took roots in conjunction with civil rights movements in the U.S., South Africa, New Zealand and Australia and decolonialization efforts especially in India and Indonesia. On a larger scale,

¹ See work by Bronwyn Davies (1982; 1989; 1993); Pam Gilbert (1992); Gilbert & Taylor (1991); Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett (1982); Connell (2002); Barbara Comber (1993; 2006; 2013a; 2013b; 2015); Comber & Nixon (2014); Comber & Simpson (2001); Barbara Kamler (1994, 2001); Allan Luke (1988; 1997; 2000; 2003; 2004; 2009; 2013; 2014). See also Baker & Luke (1991), Carmen Luke (1994), and Jenny Gore (1995).

these movements took the form of national revolutions such as the growth of socialist movements in China.²

The Development of Critical Literacy

Literacy has often been at the nexus of issues around power and privilege, dating back to the advent of the power of the pen over the sword, its ritualistic use in society and revered status in most religions, and its gatekeeping function in the right to vote. Despite these developments and the historic noteworthiness of literacy's role, critical theory did not emerge as a substantial field of study until the 1980s. As Siegel and Fernandez (2000) noted in their contribution to the third volume of the *Handbook of Reading Research*, critical theory had been overlooked as a possible entry in prior volumes. In part, critical theory emerged as a natural extension of social and cultural developments; however, it also arose as critical theoretical tenets were applied to literacy by a number of western scholars, including Michael Apple (1979; 1988; 2012), Carol Edelsky (1999, 2006) and Pat Shannon (1989; 1998; 2001; 2007; 2010; 2011; 2014; Shannon & Edmondson, 2005).

The focus on literacy by critical theorists became most apparent with the collection of papers in the volume *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern*, edited by Colin Lankshear and Peter McLaren in 1993. In their introduction to the volume, they emphasize how their use of the term “literacy” was intended to denote a shift from what they considered to be a mechanistic rendering of reading and writing (i.e., as it has appeared in schools) to practices, as they are constituted in the real world. The term “critical” was meant to evoke Freirean notions of consciousness. They make clear their alignment with Street (1984; 1993; 1995; 2003; Street, Pahl, & Rowsell, 2009) in saying that they endorse the notion of “specific social practices of reading and writing ...rather than some abstracted technology or other essence” (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. xvii). Furthermore, they state:

...in addressing critical literacy we are concerned with the extent to which, and the ways in which, actual and possible social practices and conceptualizations of reading and writing enable human subjects to understand and engage the politics of daily life

² In China, Marxism's modern day roots are evident in the Three Principles advocated by Sun Yat-sen— those of nationalism (minzu, 民族), of democracy (minquan, 民權), and of welfare (minsheng, 民生)—and later in the Chinese revolution efforts to strive for a socialist state where the proletariat was eminent, aligned with efforts to emulate Marxist-Lennon and Mao Zedong thought.

in the quest for a more truly democratic social order...make possible a more adequate “reading” of the world, on the basis of which, as Freire and others put it, people can enter into “rewriting” the world into a formation in which their own interests, identities, and legitimate aspirations are more fully present and are present more equally. (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. xviii)

Issues of identity and social structure were spurred by poststructuralism, which focused upon analyzing and deconstructing texts in terms of their construction of social categories and identities.³As Hagood (2002) contends:

What is central to critical literacy that focuses on identity is the influence of the text and specifically of identities in texts on the reader. The text, imbued with societal and cultural structures of race, class, and gender, marks the site of the struggle for power, knowledge, and representation. (pp. 250–251)

For the critical theorist, literacy research and practice—especially with regard to the classroom and the text—became a site for analyses of books and instructional regimes relating to issues of identity, representation, and power. Notable among American scholars has been the emergence of critical race theory (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1999; 2003; and Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); race critiques of literacy research (Willis, 1995; Willis & Harris, 1997); feminist critiques, including Ellsworth (1989) and Alvermann et al. (1997); and discussions of gender (e.g., Blackburn, 2002). In addition, literacy practices have been interrogated in terms of their cultural representations and authenticity (e.g., in the work of Sims, 1982, 1983; Bishop, 2007, on African American children’s literature) and cultural responsiveness (e.g., Philips’ 1983 work with Indigenous populations). Among U.S. literacy scholars, Patrick Shannon assumed a key leadership role with his advocacy for progressive democratic education, historical analyses of resistance and progressive education—as well as his work challenging some political and corporate emphases. He has made a case for reading educators being political, highlighting the challenges to teacher empowerment and analyzing the rhetoric, power dynamics, and the negative influences of the dominant forces in reading instruction in U.S. schools (especially in textbooks, testing, and standards).

³ A number of critical theorists (e.g., Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, and Judith Butler) identified themselves as poststructuralists and pursued the deconstruction of text for purposes of judging the forces at work.

The role of literacy in shaping who we are and might become has been pervasive in discussions of digital literacies (e.g., New London Group, 1996; Willinsky, 1990), work on embodiment and identity drawing in part upon the work of Deleuze (1994), and in recent discussions of the integration of virtual reality into conceptualizations of literacy. As Brandt (2001; 2009; Brandt & Clinton, 2002) and Moje, Luke, Davies, and Street (2009) have contended—in many ways reminiscent of Dyson’s (1988) discussion of how students seek coherence across multiple worlds—texts engage us in different ways, influencing who we are and imagine we might be. These scholars question the control that texts have—especially through identities that are perpetuated through texts, the discourses of schooling, and through digital affordances. As Moje, Luke, Davies, and Street (2009) suggest, readers’ engagements with texts contribute to the identities and voice afforded to them. For Indigenous educators, matters of voice and identity and lack thereof are tied to their cultural alienation and subjugation at the hands of colonization, assimilation and forms of epistemicide prevalent in their schooling.

Multifaceted Work by Selected Critical Literacy Theorists. The efforts of some critical literacy theorists over the last twenty-five years is illustrative of its scope and significance. Among modern day pioneers, Michael Apple (2012) is one of America’s most notable and widely translated critical theorists. He prefaced a collection of his selected works with the following explication of his goals:

... to understand the currents in that river of democracy, the attempts by dominant groups to channel it in dangerous directions and to block its flow, and the various ways in which counter-hegemonic movements can and do offer serious challenges to dominance. (p. 16)

The scope of work, by Apple and others, has been extensive, reaching around the world. As Apple’s preface in his selected works illustrates, the aims of this work—apart from a broad range of concerns analyzing issues of power and oppression as well as forms of critical reflexivity of his own frames and roles—are particularly relevant to literacy, including issues pertaining to literacy textbooks and practices. For example, Apple’s (2012) list of critical engagements included:

- the development of critical theories of knowledge and power;
- the necessity to move beyond reductive and essentializing approaches and to

include a wider set of dynamics in order to better understand the intersections of the contradictions among class, gender and race;

- the politics of language and the process of labeling;
- the content and form of the curriculum;
- the processes of deskilling and intensification in teachers' work;
- the power and contradiction within agency;
- the struggles over text and official knowledge;
- the importance of the state and of politics in general;
- how rightist movements get formed and how they work conflicts over issues of "common culture" and a common curriculum;
- the power of conservative religious movements in education and the larger society;
- new forms of schooling, such as home schooling and their ideological and social bases;
- the effects of globalization and diasporic populations on our understanding of the politics of culture and the education of teachers;
- and finally, the responsibilities of being a critical scholar and activist educator.

(Apple, 2012, p. 16)

Similarly, the work of Allan Luke has been seminal. Luke is a critical literacy scholar with roots in the U.S., Canada, and Australia. As he suggested in his entry for the *Encyclopedia on Language and Education*, critical literacy has an ongoing commitment to critique; to make change with the possible risk of becoming subject to one's own critique. As Luke (1997) stated:

Shared across contemporary approaches to critical literacy is an emphasis on the need for literates to take an interventionist approach to texts and discourses of all media, and a commitment to the capacity to critique, transform and reconstruct dominant modes of information. In their present form, they converge on the key question of representation and are increasingly being used to re-examine questions of identity and power in the textual cultures of new media and institutions. The focus of Freire's initial project remains central to the teaching of critical literacy in new social conditions: an emphasis on the capacity of literates and literacies to transform the construction and distribution of material and symbolic resources by communities and

social institutions. What remains ever problematic is which directions those transformations might take, and how any new literacy can figure in relation to the emergent institutional cultures and identities, texts and technologies of postmodern economies and societies. (p. 150)

Influences of Critical Theory and Critical Literacy

Critical theory had a major impact on educational thinking—providing researchers with the tools and frameworks for delineating the political forces that were at play. It clearly established that everything can and should be looked at through a political lens that examines vested interests and power. In this regard, perhaps one of the more influential discussions was James Gee's (2015) exploration of ideologies in his book, *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*. Gee's work discusses how the notion of an ideologue emerged (and was used as a foil by Napoleon initially to suggest a form of demagoguery).

Unfortunately, in the 1990s, positivism and government agencies have largely marginalized critical and more interpretive epistemologies and research paradigms by excluding them from funding for alleged lack of rigor and robust research designs, even lacking objectivity. They positioned critical theoretical developments as ideologies and as lacking the legitimacy to be used as the basis for educational policy and practices. Likewise, they took issue with the rise in teacher-based inquiry as they argued for a change to teacher accountability. The broad-based goal of engaging teachers in communities of reflective practice was replaced by mandated a list of best practices (see Callahan, Benson, & Pearson, 2008; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Tierney, 2000-2001). This re-imposed forms of top-down, totalitarian control of education, renewing advocacy for traditional empiricism as well as traditional prescriptions of government policy and practices (including standards and accountability).

Critical Cultural Analyses. While broad support for critical theoretical challenges to education were limited in the early 90s, analyses of issues of cultural representation, educational access and graduation received some attention. Critical theorists turned the lens on themselves with various forms of analyses (e.g., discourse, bibliometric, and historical) of gender, race and class, which they also applied to textbooks, reading research, issues of inequity and policy and practice. And, increasingly, publications and various institutions lent scrutiny to matters of access and representation in ways that began to hold theorists and

educational institutions accountable. The impact has been notable, in terms of making visible historic shortcomings, prompting shifts in schooling practice, and altering research pursuits and reports. As a result, in terms of schooling, it was as if desegregation and changes in representation extended to curricula and tests. In research studies, scholars were expected to (at minimum) represent the diversity of the populations that they studied and unpack their results to illuminate differences.

Inclusive Education. The tangible effects of critical theoretic views were apparent in the area of special education. Stemming from calls for egalitarianism, critical theoretic considerations mobilized a shift from models of special education tied to exclusion to those of inclusion, meeting the needs of all students in regular classrooms (Boyle & Anderson, 2020). As Knight (1999) noted:

A classroom is democratic and socially inclusive to the extent to which it welcomes all students as equally valued members of the school community. Separation and exclusion in its many forms need to be addressed by democratic education. Exclusiveness is found in the hierarchical education that has been powerfully reinforced over the past century. This hierarchy is manifest formally by tracking and ability grouping ... and informally by differential encouragement given students by classroom teachers. (p. 7)

In the 1990s, the foundation of this momentous change was anchored in the Salamanca statement, written under the auspices of UNESCO and others, which generated supported from a number of countries (UNESCO & World Conference, 1994; UNICEF, 2013). However, the replacement of exclusionary forms of special education with inclusion remains under development. Given what some consider to be a neo-liberal agenda tied to school choice, alongside arguments that it is more utopian than practical, inclusion is not universally embraced. Nonetheless, even detractors or advocates of separate services admit to aspiring to such social justice tenets—despite their concerns that teachers, schools, and parents may not have the resources and expertise to fully realize them (e.g., Norwich, 2013; Kauffman, Ward, & Badar, 2016).

Multiliteracies and Critical Theory. The advent of multiliteracies proposed a significant shift in pedagogy that aligned with tenets of critical theory, including situated, participatory literacy teaching and learning. With an interest in building upon socio-cultural

concepts (including NLS; see Street, 1993) and the changing digital affordances, a mix of literacy scholars with socio-cultural and critical orientations came together to formulate a theory in the hope of shaping literacy practices.⁴ In particular, they proposed a model that they termed multiliteracies, which included two components: 1) The notion that global communication requires multiple channels and media; and 2) The idea that multiple literacies are constituted by, and constitutive of, the multiplicity of cultures and linguistic contexts in which literacy practices occur (New London Group, 2000).

Multiliteracies represented a way to conceptualize how literacies are situated within a changing social world—one that involves a growing diversity of literacy practices, an increasingly diverse population, and an expanding variety of exchanges that require different registers, semiotic understandings, and social engagements. The proponents of multiliteracies argued for an approach to learning that was social, situated within the embodied participation of individuals and groups, and therefore embedded “in social, cultural and material” (The New London Group, 1996, p. 82) contexts. In so doing, they added momentum to the social turn at the same time as they brought to it an engagement with multimodal digital developments and a design orientation—combining literacy(ies) practices with transformative, critical, and relevant engagements and overt teaching and understandings of design features. They argued for a shift from verbocentric notions of literacy to a more semiotic framing of multiple modes, wherein students are engaged as “remakers, the transformers, and the re-shapers of the representational resources available to them” (Kress, 2000a, p. 155).

Multiliteracies as a pedagogy was not without its critics. Some queried whether it was a more prescriptive than illustrative pedagogy. As Leander and Bolt (2013) contend in their critique of multiliteracies, multiliteracies has the potential of becoming more fixed than generative, more imposed than organic. Their critique raises questions about an empirical orientation, which uses examples from selected cases as de facto empirical evidence. And, as Leander and Bolt transition to a discussion of non-representation, assemblages, and animation of text—in accordance with Deleuzean theory—they tout exemplars of

⁴ Multiliteracies scholars bringing sociocultural and critical orientations to the field included Courtney Cazden, William Cope, Norman Fairclough, James Gee, Mary Kalantzis, Gunther Kress, Allan Luke, Carmen Luke, Sarah Michaels, and Martin Nakata. For specific publications see: Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Norman Fairclough, 1992; 1995; James Gee, 2015; Allan Luke, 1988; 1997; 2000; 2003; 2004; 2009; 2013; 2014. See also Baker & Luke, 1991; Moje, Luke, Davies, & Street, 2009; Carmen Luke, 1994; Gunther Kress, 1989; 2000a; 2000b; and Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006.

multiliteracies that may in fact not be linked to it. Indeed, they present cases the authors of which did not tie to multiple literacy formulations—using these re-positioned cases as criticism, warrants, or evidence of Deleuze’s views in ways that may not be justified. (It is as if their support for Deleuzian considerations would be better developed from a different set of arguments, lest a Deleuzian view be tied to an advocacy, which is open to critique). Some argued it had the appearance of being “old wine in new bottles.”

Ethical Considerations and Critical Research. Critical theory often faces a dilemma when some of the ascribed goals of empowerment conflict with the nature of the pursuit (e.g., if they are examined in terms of ethics with a consideration for cultures). At times, researchers act presumptuously without regard to being cultural outsiders. They seek to serve the interests of others but with approaches that are more presumptuous than respectful. Indeed, critical theory appears to assume a form, which can become somewhat narcissistic and self-promoting if and when it comes untethered from cultural understanding and practices. Arguably, in some ways critical theory and critical literacy has at times become less connected with its roots (i.e., less engaged in the work of social change) and more invested in theoretical discussions, pontification of actions that should occur, or commodified forms of critical theoretical thoughts and instantiations.

Such shifts are often riddled with ethical problems, as initiatives become detached from communities that they are intended to serve. Further, initiatives become the property of the theorists and researchers, without regard to the community being discussed (including community interests, ongoing needs, and rights, such as appropriated or colonized property). Sometimes the commodification of knowledge by the researchers assumes a priority, or takes a precedence, that displaces the everyday needs and rights of the community intended to be served. There is an obvious tension, if not dilemma, which arises when individual empowerment and community considerations or consultations are not aligned—especially if extending the consultation to the community might conflict with or undermine the “critical” project. Issues of ethics and critical reflexivity provide important lenses for understanding and pursuing research, particularly in an age of global commodification often disguised or positioned as a form of liberatory practice.

This tricky space is apparent if one examines some of the approaches American and Oceania scholars have taken in feminist and gender studies. Australia has been a site for the advancement of critical literacy on a number of fronts—including the analyses of textbooks from a variety of perspectives, including feminism, the interrogation of educational research

methodologies, and concerns over systemic discrimination in conjunction with testing and teaching tied to government mandates. Yet while critical analyses have raised the consciousness of educators to the inequities and biases of educational policy and delivery, they seem to have fallen short in terms of advancing alternatives other than textbook material (that may itself reflect a generic form of criticism or genre of teaching). In a number of cases, critical theorists have been enlisted to shape and develop curriculum and teaching procedures, only to later have those procedures prescribed or positioned as best practice without regard for their organic fit or method of engaging with communities.

Literacy education scholars such as Victoria Purcell-Gates, learning theorists such as Deborah Butler (2006; Butler & Schnellert, 2008; Butler, Schnellert, & Higginson, 2008), and Indigenous educators such as Graham Smith (2011), Linda Smith (1999; 2005), and Joann Archibald (2008) argue for research partnerships with communities tied to community goals, that occur in consultation and collaboration with (and develop in the interest of supporting the needs and activities of) learners and communities. Oftentimes such an approach involves an emphasis on relationship-building as well as participation of community members in school initiatives. (Indeed, in the international arena, William Gray's 1956 book for the UN discussed the importance of projects directed at addressing community needs—an issue more recently explored in Daniel Wagner's 2018 discussion of core literacy initiatives). And, as one might expect, there is a history of such initiatives worldwide. bell hooks (1994) as well as others (Brown & Strega, 2005; Tuck & Yang, 2014) have called for forms of teacher empowerment and approaches to educational practice that is transgressive and, if necessary, aligned with resistance as well as teacher and student activism.

Moving Forward

Critical theory foregrounded the political nature of literacy at the same time as it advanced formative participatory research and development (what some might describe as activism) in the interest of social improvements on behalf of communities. Nowadays, critical theorists do so through a postcolonial frame, turning the lens on themselves and others with an eye to matters of identity and cultural practices. They unpack and interrogate themselves as they seek forms of activism and participatory research befitting critical theoretical tenets and critical reflexiveness—attempting to avoid self-interest as they seek to navigate the suppression or derailment of initiatives by opposing forces. Essentially, critical theorists must be attune to and more carefully consider the means and the ends. The means might entail

exposing hierarchies and changing the power dynamics so that they are more egalitarian and open. In order to establish systems that support an ecology of egalitarianism and openness and allow for ongoing organic change, the ends need to allow for diversity rather than uniformity and be aligned with considerations for the local and for community engagement.

At times, the field of literacy has realized these ends, means, and more, but efforts have been derailed or sabotaged by commercial interests or government overrides. Key to their success would be to ensure that there are safeguards in place that prevent collusion and subversion. Take, if you will, the whole language movement—its rapid expansion and the challenges that were and are still faced. As Pat Shannon (2010) suggested, organic egalitarian educational enterprises such as the whole language movement need to recognize that changes in literacy are not psychological and linguistic, but political. Addressing those political matters are integral considerations to moving forward.

Befittingly, a number of critical theorists have been major proponents of empowering teachers and students, arguing for a democratization of teaching and learning (consistent with John Dewey's argument for egalitarian educational pursuits). When teachers are encouraged to explore improvements in their students' learning in a fashion akin to a formative research study or design experiment, they are engaged in asking critical questions about themselves, about their students' learning, and about what they might do—together with the students and community members—to enhance learning experiences. They engage with their students in formative practices. Advocacy for such approaches is apparent in the work of a number of critical theorists. For example, Joe Kincheloe (1991), Ira Shor (1980; 1987) and others have argued for the importance of empowering teachers via their involvement in knowledge production and decision making (i.e., as a means of challenging the top-down dictums of educational practice that relegate teachers to rather mechanistic implementations of educational practices arising from research by others). In other words, they argue for teacher research that challenges the power dynamics at play (or any other educational practices that are not inclusive) and seeks answers for new directions (Hoffman, 2020). They recognize the importance of participatory decision-making.

On the negative side, however, despite the ways in which critical theories and analyses have advanced multiple frames by which educators have interrogated the world, such readings have often paled in terms of their influence. Some have conjectured that many have focused more on the critique than reform, stopping short of the ultimate goal of becoming agents of change, or sponsors or allies for others. Critical analyses thus sometimes appear to advance theories detached from communities as theorists and researchers engage in

forms of academic commodification of theories—what some have referred to as the privatized academic (Smith, 2011). Accordingly, the community or persons remain “guests” rather than “hosts” of such efforts (Morgan, 2018). They remain the subject of initiatives rather than overseers or participants in the decision-making. Critical analyses thus sometimes appear to engage in forms of exclusion of the participants and communities that the research might be intended to serve. Perhaps the positive outcome of some of this critique of critical perspectives is to establish an ethic of self-criticism among those who engage in critique of other efforts.

Indeed, an ethical approach to critical literacy research therefore involves going beyond member checking to a democratization of research that is participatory, organic, and accommodating of community and individuals. It is not inconsistent with the notion of catalytic validity advocated for by Patti Lather (1986; 1992) and Maxime Green (1995), or the guidelines for research suggested by Indigenous groups (see Smith, 1998, 2005) or those that befit participatory tenets (Goodwin, 2012) that foster at a minimum respect, reciprocity, consultation and local decision-making (i.e., especially those that do not colonize the local or commodify their practices). It is consistent with the participatory design research and social justice efforts that have attended to cross-border circumstances of non-mainstream communities in refuge (e.g., Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; de los Ríos & Molina, 2020; Gutiérrez, & Jurow, 2016; Patel, 2018).

In other words, while a critical literacy lens has added immeasurably to our appreciation and understanding of power dynamics—especially the systems at play—it has not always done so in ways that are participatory and respectful of local situations. Indeed, theoretically, empirically, and practically, engagement in critical theory or pedagogy or literacy involves a number of perils. For example, it should be recognized that western versions of Marxist critique and Freirean notions of oppression and empowerment have also been criticized as having the potential of being too broad when local characteristics and cultural considerations should be heeded. Concern over a one-size-fits all approach to analyzing and proposing power has been critiqued by various groups concerned with places of intersection—especially those of race, gender, and class. It also has been criticized in terms of its reach across borders to other cultures, with the understanding that this needs to be tempered and complicated (e.g., Takayama, 2009). Indeed, critics aptly point out many of the tenets that undergird some critical approaches fall short in terms of attributions (e.g., Multiple Literacies can be found in the writings of Freire and others that seem to be neglected in terms of attribution and their discussions; see Rogers, 2018).

Concurrent with these criticisms has been the emergence of various different critiques representing efforts to adopt a wider variety of perspectives—befitting these different strands as well as reflecting or accommodating the debates and divisions that have occurred or may be ongoing. For example, critical race theory (Tate, 1997) and feminist theory have a number of sub-strands which are themselves sites of debate over emerging theoretical postulates or appropriate methodologies. Within postmodern feminism, Judith Butler's (2011) position has been simultaneously embraced, questioned and shifted. Not surprisingly, then, the uniform application of critical theory as a lens for use in different settings has been problematized.

With some exceptions, critical theory has manifested itself as a critique of hegemonies within academic circles with only some connections to learners in classrooms or the real world. However, as literacy connections to civic and community matters have emerged, so critical theory has become more connected to societal matters—whether it be through a new lens such as posthumanist or transliteracy, or through the portal of schools or community centers (e.g., Lenters & McDermott, 2019; Sheehy, 2009; Stornaiuolo, Smith, & Phillips, 2017). In recent years, a number of literacy educators have engaged students in raising their critical voices in conjunction with media pursuits, interrogating their worlds and the hegemonies in existence. They include a number of digital video projects as well as initiatives involving theater and forms of drama education.

For example, a number of educators and community activists have enlisted various forms of drama to simulate these political systems at play in peoples' lives to expose, examine, and explore ways that they might be countered. Most notable are the interactive drama pursuits stemming from the drama frames of Augusto Boal and those emanating from the process drama work advanced by Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, Cecily O'Neill, Michael Anderson, Brian Edmiston, Robin Ewing, John O'Toole, Tara Goldstein and others (e.g., Boal, 1979; Boal, 1996; Bolton, 1984; Bolton, and Heathcote 1995; Edmiston, 2014; Edmiston & Enciso, 2002; Freebody, Balfour, Finneran, Anderson, 2018; Goldstein, 2013; O'Neill, 1995; O'Toole, 1992; Rozansky & Aageson, 2010).

Side comment III 5 b 2

Rob offers some comments on drama as a critical tool.

Our colleagues in fields such as drama educators have much to teach us about framing and building upon critical readers' engagements. Dramatists and directors from Bertolt Brecht, Konstantin Stanislavsky, David Williamson, Andrew Upton, Harold Pinter, Quentin Tarantino to educators such as Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, Cecily O'Neill, Brian Edmiston, Tara Goldstein have forms of practical theory that have the potential to transcend our cognitive and socio-cognitive and critical theoretically based understandings of literacy. I recall watching on separate occasions, Cecily O'Neill and Dorothy Heathcote, move learners in a participatory fashion into scenarios or drama frames and shift the participants position in and out of the frame as they engaged them in experiencing worldly matters and also critically reflecting upon them. Their practices transcended theorizing as they enlisted a combination of strategies and understandings with their deft skills to punctuate imagined circumstances with calls to critique, improvise, critical reflect as preambles to pondering of pursuing transformative changes.

Another heartening development are studies that pursue activism and agency, and how they might be achieved. Unquestionably, these pursuits of change may sometimes falter or involve a struggle. As Roger Slee (2018) lamented in his efforts to advance an inclusive education model:

...the structures and cultures of schooling reinforce privilege and exacerbate disadvantage according to the taut and taught, boundaries of the neo-liberal imagination. Accordingly, there is no shortage of data demonstrating academic underachievement and diminished educational experiences according to students' class, gender, race, ethnicity, or perceived ability or disability. (p. 31)

Certainly, critical theorists may need a long-term view. As Bregman (2017) stated:

If we want to change the world we need to be unrealistic, unreasonable, and impossible. Remember: those who called for the abolition of slavery, for suffrage for women, and for same-sex marriage were also once branded as lunatics. Until history proved them right. (p. 264)

Despite these challenges, a number of studies have or are being pursued in an effort to both understand hegemonies, resistance, and change related to matters of difference among cultures, ethnicities, genders and sexualities (e.g., Beck, 2019; Curnow, Davis & Asher,

2019; McCarty & Lee, 2014; San Pedro, 2018). A growing number of research activists are exploring agency in an effort to mobilize change within their institutions and classrooms, and finding leverage to do so (See Side Comment III.5b.2; see also: Garrett, 2018; Rigney, Bignall, & Hemming, 2015; Smith, 2011).

A history of literacy education: waves of research and practice

Side Comment III.5b.2.

Transformative Change

As Rob noted in his discussion of global meaning making and transformative change (Tierney, 2020):

Transformative change is rarely straightforward, and endeavors to do so require careful contemplation and meaningful engagements with stakeholders, including participatory forms of decision-making and approaches to moving forward that are respectful of the communities involved. Transformative change is political at various levels—within and across communities and various subgroups and individuals with the communities, various agencies that serve the communities as well as the institutions that govern the agencies.

Take, if you will, efforts at transformative change for indigenous communities. In various communities there have been countless efforts to remove the yolk of colonialization and instead breathe life into schools by moving away from standardized and culturally estranged education to culturally responsive and sustainable education. In some Indigenous communities, we have seen the development of Indigenous ways of knowing as core educational developments (e.g., New Zealand Kaupapa Māori theory; see Smith, 1990; www.rangahau.co.nz/research-idea/27/).

In Australia, however, it remains a struggle. Most recently, it has manifested itself in various forms of activism to recent efforts around the “Uluru Declaration of the Heart” that seeks formal recognition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and their ways of knowing (see: <http://nationalunitygovernment.org/content/uluru-statement-heart>). And, it is apparent in communities striving for a political foothold as they represent the community interests including the land in ongoing economic and educational matters. Australia’s Indigenous communities struggle to be heard and to have their rights respected by the colonizing government. They have sought reconciliation but also leverage through constitutional change, through court cases challenging erroneous constructions of others (e.g., Mabo). Because aboriginal sovereignty over their own affairs is rare, other forms of leverage have become a focus. Adroitly, a reading of these circumstances has some aboriginal community seeking other forms of positioning to the same ends such as cooperation and contractual agreements that elevate the possibility of community development by and for communities. For example, Daryle Rigney and his Aboriginal community (Ngarrindjeri), in hopes of attaining a degree of sovereignty and self-governance, have engaged in forms of contractual relationships with the federal and state governments around their water problems. The Ngarrindjeri community (located at the mouth of the Murray River—Australia’s longest and perhaps the river that is considered among the most vital to its sustenance) has been involved in an effort to re-balance the power dynamic between themselves and the settler government. As Daryle Rigney and his colleagues detail, the community with agility positioned themselves enlisting settler law to have agency. As Rigney and his colleagues stated:

In 2007, they consolidated their governing authority in a peak political body, the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority (NRA) built upon an

existing Indigenous political culture. By providing a central point of political administration the NRA both enabled the coordination of activities carried out by the various Ngarrindjeri governance organizations and established a unified point of contact for communication and negotiation with the state.

Employing principles of contract law, the negotiation regime initiated by Ngarrindjeri is geared towards the creation of legally binding accords known as Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan Agreements (KNYA). The KNY process does not designate fixed outcomes, but rather clarifies a starting point for respectful communication between interested parties. Every KNYA requires parties to commit to listening, discussion and negotiation over any and all management matters concerning Ngarrindjeri jurisdiction over their peoples and their Country. Importantly, in accordance with contract law, the negotiation can only proceed when there is a formal procedural recognition of the capacity of each partner to enter into the negotiation and agreement process. This necessarily includes an a priori recognition of the NRA as a peak political body that registers the fact of Ngarrindjeri sovereignty over their (unceded) territories.

(Rigney, Bignall, & Hemming, 2015, pp. 339–341)

For Daryle Rigney, this is a tricky place even as a member of the Ngarrindjeri community. For outsiders, this is space that would be even more tricky to negotiate and indeed, an outsider's knowledge, commitment and vested interests might be considered suspect. Outsiders may view themselves as emancipists, but be seen as having the vestiges of colonization, imperialism, racism, objectification, commodification, universalism, individualism and simplification which fail to address the complexities and differences in the realities, interests, histories and epistemologies of diverse cultures. ...activists may need to search for an ethical compass to address what seems paradoxical and a form of activism that befits the circumstances and communities being supported or partnered. ... researchers can find themselves slipping from advocate and ally to cultural interloper engaged in a form of colonization and appropriation. (Tierney, 2020, pp. 51–53)

From the perspective of Indigenous scholars, such transformative change could entail what Māori scholar Linda Smith (2005) suggested in the context of discussing ethics for Indigenous research:

For Indigenous and other marginalized communities, research ethics is at a very basic level about establishing, maintaining, and nurturing reciprocal and respectful relations, not just among people as individuals but also with people, as collectives and as members of communities, and with humans who live in and with other entities in the environment. The abilities to enter pre-existing relationships; to build, maintain, and nurture relationships; and to strengthen connectivity. (p. 97)

Additionally, as Ali Abdi (2015) has warned, activism should advance cautiously, lest it unwittingly advances an agenda which is assimilationist. For example, in his discussion of Bolivia, Aman (2017) illustrated how Westerners not only control the words to describe but also appropriate and control even the manner of change. In the Bolivian context, the

language of the Indigenous—including words such as *interculturalidad*—was enlisted in ways that detracted from its use by the Indigenous groups. Respectful critical research and global meaning making requires practices that avoid outside imposition, the appropriation of others in the outsider's image, and the displacement of the societies, communities, and individuals the researchers might be seeking to read, study, or support. Accordingly, global meaning making may need to thwart what has been the dominant research norms that have deferred to forms of standardizing rather than differentiating others, objectivity and detachment over participation, cooperation and consultation.

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