

Of Critical Theory and Critical Literacy

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Among the approaches to teaching reading and writing, critical literacy offers to connections to the larger world of ideas that are among the most impressive and challenging of any program that makes a claim on the school day. Even in its more innocuous forms, critical literacy can be said to owe a striking debt to the twentieth-century legacy of Critical Theory. Critical Theory represents a body of work that was produced, in large part, by the Frankfurt School or Frankfurt Circle associated most notably with Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Eric Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas (Jay, 1973). Critical Theory amounts to a philosophical take on social theory, informed by Marx and Freud. During the middle decades of last century it offered an unrelenting critique of contemporary sources and cause of oppression and repression. It was given to intellectual acts of resistance that were intended to undermine the increasing regulation of life, in an effort to create a counter-weight to what was seen as the mass deception fostered by political regimes that were sustained by the culture industry.

The educational influence of Critical Theory is most immediately present, and often openly acknowledged, in the critical literacy work associated with Ira Shor (1999), Shirley Steinberg (2005a), Bronwyn Davies (1996), Allan Luke (2000), Barbara Combe (2002), Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (2002), and others. While the larger educational influence of Critical Theory extends to the more broadly directed *critical pedagogy* that informs the work of Joe L. Kincheloe, bell hooks, Henry Giroux, Roger Simon, and others (Kincheloe, 2004).¹ Through the 1990s, critical literacy emerged as a “coalition of educational interests committed to engaging with the possibilities that technologies of writing and other modes of inscription offer for social change, cultural diversity, economic equity, and political enfranchisement,” as Sandy

¹ Kincheloe writes of how “critical theory forms the foundation of critical pedagogy” (2004, p. 45), while his chapter on “the foundations of critical pedagogy” devotes a section on Antonio Gramsci, among the figures most commonly associated with Critical Theory (p. 64-66). See Lankshear and Knobel for distinctions to be made between critical pedagogy (focused on teaching) and critical literacy (on language), while acknowledging that critical literacy has formed at “the intersection of critical theory and pedagogy with literacy studies” (2002). Leonard (1990) also credits critical pedagogy as a political practice of Critical Theory.

Muspratt, Allan Luke and Peter Freebody put it, following a pair of conferences on critical literacy held at Griffith University in 1992 and 1993 (1997, p. 1).

How Critical Theory, as a thoroughly German philosophical school (think Kant, Hegel, and Marx) that first arose in the 1920s and 30s, came to have such a sustained influence on a number of education scholars who are now reaching their prime could be cast as a story of the 1960s. The more bookish, left-leaning elements of the generation that came of age during that decade found in Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), second perhaps only in back-pack popularity to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), a new and invigorating way of making sense of the world. Marcuse opened this book by flatly declaring that "A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress" (1964, p. 1).² He nailed the bankruptcy of suburban life in a way that *Time* and *Life* magazines managed to miss, giving sacred democracy no leeway (amid the cold war), and throwing in ironic punch-line tokens, at least in the case of this opening sentence. The book provided a relentless critique of the here and now for the industrialized world—"the totalitarian universe of technological rationality is the latest transmutation of Reason" (p. 123) – and sold over 300,000 copies.³ Paperback Marcuse gave the counter-culture a philosophically critical edge, in exchange for beads and flowers, and it cut through the smooth and comfortable lives of our parents' generation like the wail of an over-amplified electric guitar.⁴

Some 40 years on, it may be tempting to wonder how far this critical sensibility has come since Marcuse first asked "how can the people who have been the object of effective and productive domination by themselves create the conditions of freedom?" (p. 6). What now of the harsh note on which Marcuse concluded *One-Dimensional Man*? In a final section entitled "The Chance of Alternatives," and on the book's final page, he saw no better path ahead than to give one's life up to what he termed "the Great Refusal" (1964, p. 257). It was "just say *no*" in the biggest way. And why? Well, as Marcuse saw it, "the critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and the future; holding no promise and

² Cf. Kerouac's opening line: "I had first met Dean after my wife and I split up" (1957, p. 1).

³ One testimony to the receptivity of the readership at the time is the general accuracy of Michael Walzer's critique that "Marcuse's prose [in *One-Dimensional Man*] is cumbersome, harsh, repetitive, abstract, only sometimes compelling, never beautiful" (p. 170, p. 1988).

⁴ Marcuse's opening lines at his talk at the Dialectics of Liberation conference in London in 1967: "I am very happy to see so many flowers here and that is why I want to remind you that flowers, by themselves, have no power whatsoever, other than the power of men and women who protect them and take care of them against aggression and destruction" (1967).

showing no success, it remains negative” (ibid.).

Today, one has to wonder what traces of the great refusal could possibly be stalking the hallways of “effective and productive” schools of education in the guise of *critical literacy*? I would have say *yes* and *no*, too (to stay true to Critical Theory’s negative spirit). That is, critical literacy does carry forward this legacy, but not entirely and often for very good reason. This chapter offers a way to reconsider the balance between what is brought forward and what is left behind, just as it considers whether the value of Critical Theory can be so selectively retained. To pause over just what these difficult, relentlessly critical works demanded of readers and students is to reconsider the origins of what was critical at the root of critical literacy, as well as the mix and balance of critical and affirmative elements since the grateful refusal played so well to so many. Revisiting earlier work in Critical Theory, particularly that of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, remains a way to root about in the basic principles of critical literacy. To do so, you may have already realized, is to risk riding the current wave of 1960s nostalgia that tends to grip my generation at this time in our lives. I am writing this, for example, as the fiftieth anniversary of Kerouac publishing that generation-mobilizing *On the Road* is being celebrated, as are the 40 years that have passed since San Francisco’s Summer of Love, where all that mobilization seemed to converge at least for a moment.⁵

On the other hand, my intention is not to call anyone on the carpet for a lack of fealty to Adorno’s negative dialectic. Such dogmatic gestures are so obviously contrary to what Critical Theory is all about. If it was not always the case or ever enough, it was at least Marcuse’s boast that “critical theory is, last but not least, critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its basis” (1968, p. 156). Certainly, the feminist take up of Critical Theory’s shortcomings on gender continues to follow in the best tradition of extending its own critical dialectic (Hebeale, 2006; Marcuso, 2006), as are more recent critiques of its Eurocentrism and other ethnocentricities that critical pedagogy seeks to move its critical work beyond (Kincheloe 2007).⁶

Those who contributed to Critical Theory were attentive to history, even if historical

⁵ Less celebrated is that also 40 years ago Theodor Adorno’s *Prisms* (1967) was published as his first book to be translated into English.

⁶ Marcuso, for example, uses the “emancipatory project of early Critical Theory” as a means of reminding feminists of the degree to which they have more recently “curbed its political aspirations and narrowed its theoretical field” with a goal of being able to “diagnose when and how critique loses its *critical* cast, when and how it reproduces the rationalities of power it purports to resist” (2006, pp. 88-89).

developments promised no relief from the need for critique: “Critical thought... does not abandon its commitment even in the face of progress” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972, p. ix). Marcuse speaks of how “critical theory concerns itself with preventing the loss of the truths which past knowledge labored to attain” (1968, p. 152). It “must concern itself to a hitherto unknown extent with the past – precisely insofar as it is concerned with the future” (p. 158). Adorno, too, held to this sense of the past’s subtle persistence. He wrote toward the end of his life that “whatever was once thought, however, can be suppressed; it can be forgotten and can even vanish,” only to affirm that despite this suppression, “it cannot be denied that something of it survives” (1991, p. 203).

Critical Theory itself bears the marks of its own rough history. The Frankfurt Circle was forged out of the experience of largely Jewish exiles forced to flee their imagined homeland under the threat of initially having their right to teach denied and then the very right to life (itself a great refusal). They then took various paths (tragically aborted in the case of Walter Benjamin in 1940) through Paris, Oxford, New York, California and then back to Frankfurt, with the Frankfurt’s homelessness itself becoming the ethical ground on which the critique is built, or as Adorno was to plainly put it: “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” (1984, 39).⁷ In the course of this history, members of the Frankfurt School sought, as Habermas was to sum it up, “to think through the political disappointment at the absence of revolution in the West, the development of Stalinism in Soviet Russia, and the victory of fascism in Germany” (1995, p. 116).

How, then with critical literacy, today, with its Critical Theory roots rarely showing more than a trace of this earlier history? It is so clearly and comfortably at home in the schools by this point that you can find critical literacy listed as one of the reading topics promoted by the International Reading Association, which represents tens of thousands of teachers in its promotion of professionalism among those involved in literacy instruction. Still, in the IRA’s coverage of critical literacy, something of a family resemblance can be found with Critical Theory’s earnest unmasking of consumer and economic ideologies. The IRA advises teachers

⁷ Another aspect of this remaining apart can be seen in the active pursuit of the Institute of Social Research’s independence, which gave rise to the Frankfurt School, as that independence was maintained through the philanthropic support of the Weil family and by means of affiliation with the University of Frankfurt (Jay, 1973, pp. 3-9). Max Horkheimer, in his foreword to Martin Jay’s history of the Frankfurt School notes that with Weil’s support, “a group of men interested in social theory and from different scholarly background, came together with the belief that formulating the negative in the epoch of transition was more meaningful than academic careers” (Jay, 1973, p. xxv).

that critical literacy entails encouraging “active, engaged reading” with students, which “means approaching texts with a critical eye—thinking about what they say about our world, why they say it, and whether the view they promote should be accepted” (Focus on Critical Literacy, 2007). The IRA then goes on to offer teachers a lesson on determining a writer’s “point of view” as an instance of critical literacy in practice. A closely related and no less popular approach to critical literacy is to teach students to “detect bias” with a focus on the news media: “Despite the journalistic ideal of ‘objectivity,’ every news story is influenced by the attitudes and background of its interviewers, writers, photographers and editors” (Media Awareness Network, 2007).

Identifying *bias* as the issue can make these acts of misrepresentation and distortion appear as no more than a passing prejudice, a slight unconscious tendency, among certain media people who should know better. Yet such lessons can also open the prospect of something more. A teacher who helps students make a habit out of considering, with each text they encounter, what does it say about the our world and why does it say it could lead the class into engaging with the same ideological issues around “mass deception” that Critical Theory so avidly pursued (to use part of a chapter title from *Dialectics of Enlightenment*; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). A few of the students may start to question the larger economic and ideological motives behind, say, newspaper editorials supporting America’s military actions in the name of freedom and democracy. From such a starting point, the endemic and repeated pattern of biases could become apparent for inspired teachers and students, who would realize something far more systemic and inherently ideological is at work in mainstream media, resulting in, as Horkheimer and Adorno put it, “the stunting of the mass-media consumer’s powers of imagination and spontaneity” (1972, p. 126).⁸

If but the faintest trace of Critical Theory survives in what the IRA and Media Awareness Network make of critical literacy, its legacy is far more vibrant and alive among more progressive forces in education. Ira Shor, at the City University of New York, for example, has used critical literacy as a concept to apply and extend the work of Paulo Freire in post-secondary education.⁹ When it comes to the question of “what is critical literacy,” Shor treats it as a means

⁸ The rise today of the blogosphere, as a large-scale alternative media with a substantial segment devoted to taking issue, from its own ideological positions, with this mainstream media, offers educators further opportunities to help students realize just what the culture industry would make of them.

⁹ Freire’s (1985) rightly celebrated work on behalf of educating the oppressed has proven an inspiring point of departure for many working in critical literacy, with the step from Critical Theory’s interest in emancipation taking

by which we “can redefine ourselves and remake society, if we choose, through alternative rhetoric and dissident projects”; he holds that “this is where critical literacy begins, for questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane” (Shor, 1999). It is also with the questioning of power relations, discourses and identifies that Critical Theory begins in Shor’s work, and far more so than in his hopes of redefining lives and remaking society. In fact, if Critical Theory begins with such questioning, it is never quite clear where Critical Theory goes next, except on to further critical questioning. This is part of the dilemma of Critical Theory’s legacy for critical literacy. The IRA lessons on critical literacy may not go far enough in their pursuit of critique, or at least would take an inspired teacher, with Joe L. Kincheloe’s *Critical Pedagogy Primer* (2004) tucked under their arm, to push beyond the superficial identification of bias, and realize the more profound ravages of ideology that affected by the media. But by the same token, Shor and others need to recognize the risk of assuming that this critical questioning will lead to the remaking of societies. It can have the affect of undermining the value of the critique itself to which Critical Theory so closely held.

Horkheimer and Adorno offer repeated instances of this blunt refusal to step beyond the questioning; they were more than satisfied at leaving things upturned by the aggressive, no-holds-barred critique. They conclude their review of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, by noting the ultimate hollowing out of our lives in modern times, while not pausing for a moment over what was to be done as a result: “The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions” (1972, p. 167).

So at one level it makes sense that Shor, Steinberg, and others, inspired by the level of critique sustained by Critical Theory, have seen fit to carry the critical ball into the schools through the development of educational programs and by supporting “alternative rhetoric and dissident projects,” to cite Shor again (1999). To their credit, those working today with critical literacy have struck something of a balance, in which they have kept distinct both the surviving elements of Critical Theory, in Adorno’s sense, and the educational rhetoric of empowered

on the far more educational sensibility with Freire’s focus on empowerment (Morgan, 1997; Shor and Pari, 1999; Lankshear and McLaren, 1993).

alternatives and the equipping of students with needed skills.¹⁰ Keeping these two aspects in peaceful coexistence amounts to an ongoing educational experiment, not just of working from within the institutions – as the Frankfurt Circle had little trouble with that aspect, even as they worked hard to maintain their intellectual and financial independence as an Institute of Social Research – but in how far the weight of this critique can be carried into the lives of teachers and children (something for which Adorno, at least, had something of an appreciation for, with further discussion of this to follow). This is why it is worth reconsidering how themes of Critical Theory and education programs can be brought together in critical literacy.

To take one striking example, Shirley Steinberg, a professor at McGill University, provides an analysis of *critical (media) literacy* that in the course of a single paragraph carries with it this movement between the current rhetoric of student preparation and the spirit of Critical Theory. In the preface to a reader on media literacy, she first establishes the collection's educational bona fides. She makes it clear that “our responsibility [is], then as educators, to prepare our students/citizens, to learn how to use [media], consume it, and to have personal power over it” (2007, xiv). That obligation out of the way, she decisively delivers a few sentences later the decisive Critical Theory line: “Media have been and can continue to become the ultimate hegemonic WMD [weapons of mass destruction] to a complacent or ignorant audience” (ibid.). Horkheimer couldn't have said it any better. But then Dewey might well subscribe to Steinberg's earlier sense of educational responsibility. Certainly, I would. There is *realpolitik* and savvy to such a stance, as it is able to make what is critically subversive possible for so many more teachers and students than would otherwise be realized. There is, as well, a distinction to be made here between the practice of theory and the theory of practice, with the traditions of Critical Theory playing a greater role in her scholarly publishing (the practice of theory) than in her work with education students where the theory of necessary educational practices play a greater part in helping these students bring this critical literacy into the lives of the students. There are precedents within the Critical Theory legacy, at least in the case of Adorno as I shall discuss below, for the material and institutional basis for these distinctions.¹¹

¹⁰ There are those who would blur distinctions between critical theory and pedagogical strategies, as suggested by Robert Young's advise to teachers “it makes it a little easier to remember that critical theory is more appropriately thought of as a critical *method*” (1991, p. 2) and by the book title *Critical Literacy/Critical Teaching: Tools for Preparing Responsive Teachers* (Dozier, Johnston, and Rogers, 2006).

¹¹ A similar skills-based grounding for lessons inspired by Critical Theory is found when Bronwyn Davies defines “critical literacy” as a “capacity to make language live, to bring oneself to live through language and, *at the same*

In terms of large-scale implementations of this two-sided approach to critical literacy, Allan Luke was able to bring such a program to Queensland Australia in his role at the time of Deputy Director General of Education for the state. For him the question was “what happens when a ‘radical’ idea [like critical literacy] moves from the political outlands to become a key concept in a state curriculum” (2000, p. 448). Under his leadership, critical literacy was to form part of a “semiotic ‘toolkit’” in a state-wide curriculum (p. 449). The idea was to enable students to use “their existing and new discourse resources for exchange in the social fields where texts and discourses matter” (p. 449). His was a “a vision of literacy as visible social practices with language, text, and discourse,” and he saw critical literacy as “an educational project that engages with critique of the worlds of work, community life, media and popular and traditional cultures” (p. 459). Critical literacy is again part of an instrumental skill-set, as well as the source of specific critiques, whether of “possessive individualism” or “gendered forms of social identity” or on behalf of “disadvantaged students” (p. 452). However, Luke points out, these “‘critiques’ did not stay critiques for long,” and were soon “transformed into practical agendas and ‘materials for teachers across Australia” (ibid.). Luke again makes clear the back and forth motion of these ideas, the moving within and outside of Critical Theory’s particular legacy. The movement back into the sharper legacy of Critical Theory adding considerably, I would suggest, to the quality of this tool, while the moving outside of it, by turning it into skill and method giving it its hold on the classroom.¹²

In the hands of these educators, teaching remains an act of hope and possibility that was otherwise missing from the philosophy of the Frankfurt School, even as its members continued to teach a distinguished second generation of critical theorists (including Jürgen Habermas, Angela Davis, Andrew Feenberg, and Axel Honneth among others). It might seem the perfect complement, if not the ultimate compliment, to give Critical Theory a bit of a second life in the pages of this work devoted to critical literacy. But something else has to be said as well, at this point of reflection. And that is, that Critical Theory’s disinclination to move beyond a theory of critique cannot be treated as entirely the result of difficult and dismal historical experiences or a

time, bring to bear on language a critique which makes visible the powerful forces of rationality and linear patterns of thought” (1997, p. 28); she then goes on to conclude that critical literacy (and critical social literacy) “are aimed at giving students some skill in catching language in the act of formation and in recognizing and assessing the effects of that formation” (p. 29).

¹² Luke: “The accelerated attempts by teachers to transform contemporary academic theory... into classroom practice were and remain quite remarkable among Australian teachers” (2000, p. 452).

lack of opportunity in exile. In America, rather, the ability to obtain research funding for empirical studies in prejudice became the best means of maintaining the intellectual independence of the institute (keeping it from being absorbed into Columbia University). But in all of that, the critique has its own special claim as a source of knowledge and understanding for Critical Theory. This claim rests on how it engages the gaps and contradictions within existing ideas (in a dialectic), rather than imagining that it has a grip on an external reality. What follows from the critique, whether in the form of educational programs, alternative or experimental models, systematic research projects, was a concern to the Frankfurt School insofar as such practical and programmatic matters could, if they began to drive the work, place the theoretical value of critique at risk.

Members of the Institute of Social Research did undertake in Frankfurt and New York social science studies of authority and culture, Nazism and anti-Semitism. The Institute maintained an active publishing program, including a scholarly journal, that brought together theoretical work, intellectual historical studies, and survey results (e.g., German physicians' attitudes toward sexual morality). In America, the Institute undertook a major program of research on the sources of prejudice that was financed by the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Labor Committee in the 1940s. But still Horkheimer treated the empirical side of this research as itself an experiment, to be approached warily, and saw the challenge, as director of the Institute, "to present examples of an approach especially aware of the necessity to integrate theoretical thinking with empirical analysis" (1941, p. 365). The degree to which that integration was successful or ultimately helpful to theoretical thinking (as it was for Institute funding) is an important question to ask, as part of what Critical Theory achieved, and what I am drawing attention to with this chapter in relation to the work of critical literacy advocates, is how integration may not be the principal issue in the relation between the theoretical and empirical, compared to more distinct forms of co-existence that are possible. The Frankfurt Circle had long rejected "the hypothesis-verification-conclusion model," as Martin Jay points out in his history of the Institute, given how, in his words, "modern empiricism [was seen to have] capitulated before the authority of the status quo" in its positivist attempts to separate facts and values (1973,

pp. 240, 62).¹³

In the 1940s, Adorno became involved in the major empirical research initiatives on prejudice and authoritarian personality types through the Institute.¹⁴ He later explained, in the sardonically entitled radio talk “Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America,” that in conducting his work with the Institute’s most famous study on authoritarian personalities, involving interviews and questionnaires, “we never considered the theory simply as a hypothesis, but rather as in a certain sense something independent” (1998a, p. 236). It is the work of theory, for Adorno, that stands, ultimately, as a corrective to the empiricist reduction of experience. Adorno was determined, after returning to Germany, to make up for the lapses: “What I have in mind after all that is a kind of restitution of experience against the empiricists deformation” (p. 242)

While acknowledging the complex historical exigencies that enabled the Frankfurt Circle, with remarkable adeptness, to hold together as more than just a body of thought, it seems important to step back and review what it attempted to make of critique. This legacy can otherwise be lost sight of, as we build, propose and construct school programs, work with teachers in action research settings, as we learn from our students how to use new technologies to develop new forms of critical literacy, and as we push the possibilities of critique into the blogosphere, virtual realities, social networks, and global activism.

In making sense of Critical Theory, it needs to be seen what sort of theory it is and is not. It is certainly not a theory in the sense of traditional philosophical theories, such as Platoism or pragmatism. That is, it has not set out to explain how it is we know the world and should act within that knowledge, at least not apart from its sense that a critical engagement with what passes for common sense is where it stands on its surest philosophical ground. There is no presumption within Critical Theory that the goal is to identify any sort of real or ideal world that operates outside of this dialectic engagement with negative aspects of the administered life, the pseudo-reality and activity. And while elements of Marx are at work at many points in Critical Theory—from the class analysis to concerns over alienation and dehumanization—it is not a theory

¹³ Adorno, in a section of his book *Minima Moralia* (1951) that he later excised, wrote: “The procedure of the official social sciences is little more than a parody of the businesses that keep such sciences afloat while really needing it only as an advertisement” (cited by Jenemann, 2007, p. 1).

¹⁴ The Institute’s best-known study resulted in *The Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford (1950), which Martin identifies as “probably the most deeply flawed work of prominence in political psychology” with its “methodological, procedural, and substantive errors” the subject of much critique, even as he acknowledges “theoretically rich critique of the authoritarians.”

like Marxism, which Horkheimer criticized for presuming to pursue a “knowledge of a ‘totality’ or of a total and absolute truth” (1993, p. 129; see also Rush 2004, p. 9). Critical Theory *qua* theory, is all the more removed from natural science theories such as evolution. For all of its work in educational institutions, it was not interested in formulating educational theories, such as John Dewey’s theory of the role of art and experience in learning.

Critical Theory is far more a theory in the sense of constantly bringing forward a speculative set of ideas about, in this case, what lies behind this seemingly given reality. It is the theoretical product of imagination, insight, and thoughtfulness. It is a theory that did not seek its fulfillment in practice. Or as Adorno somewhat obfuscates it, it is not given to “consecrating existing conditions by making practical applicability of knowledge its criterion for knowledge; supposedly nowhere else could the practical effectiveness of knowledge be tested” (1998b, p. 259). Critical Theory is a theory about the value of taking a critical stance, of finding contradictions, of recording losses, as to the economic conditions, aesthetic qualities, and individual expression of our lives. Though ideas were drawn from Freud, Marx, Hegel, Kant, any aspirations these thinkers had to grasp and represent the whole of a phenomenon were treated with deep suspicion. Adorno took this stance to the point of declaring that “the whole is the untrue” (1951, p. 50).¹⁵

For all of that, Habermas is right to say that Critical Theory sought a “totalized critique” (1995, p. 119) even as it worked against such totalities. Those involved in the Frankfurt Circle spoke of their work as fragments, wrote in aphorisms, included notes and drafts in published works (see Adorno, 2005; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). However theoretical, the claims never lacked for confidence or assurance, certainly on the part of Adorno, whether his target was art—“Every work of art is an unexecuted crime” (1951 p. 111)—or women—“Women of especial beauty are condemned to unhappiness” (1951, p. 171).¹⁶

Despite its anti-epistemological tendencies, Critical Theory still possessed a theory of knowledge, one from which critical literacy advocates can draw both in their teacher education programs and scholarly projects. Critical Theory did not pursue a theory of knowledge that had to do with system or method, criteria or checks. In fact, Horkheimer and Adorno saw in such

¹⁵ Bonner (1998) identifies this as the basis of an anti-epistemology in Adorno’s work. See also, Horkheimer and Adorno: “Explanations of the world as all or nothing are mythologies” (1972, pp. 24).

¹⁶ This assurance is worth comparing to what poet John Keats termed “negative capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (1817).

mainstays of modern rigorous inquiry the first misstep of the Enlightenment, tracing the problem back to Bacon's seventeenth-century pursuit of experimental science. As Horkheimer and Adorno saw it: "On the road to modern science, men renounce any claim to meaning. They substitute formula for concept, rule and probability for cause and motive" (1972, p. 5). The emphasis placed on the development of scientific methods is taken to represent the Enlightenment's failure of nerve, its anxiety over issues of control, knowledge, and power: "Enlightenment has put aside the classic requirement of thinking about thought...Mathematical procedure became, so to speak, the ritual of thinking" (p. 24). Even language has succumbed: "There are no longer any available form of linguistic expression which has not tended toward accommodation to dominant currents of thought" (p. xii).

Such systems and forms of expression need to be opened and exposed by entering in a critical spirit through the inevitable gaps that persist. To engage in critique is seen as a dialectical process of confronting propositions with counter-propositions based on those gaps, or as Horkheimer and Adorno spin it around and around: "To proceed dialectically means to think in contradictions, for the sake of the contradiction already experienced in the object, and against that contradiction. A contradiction in reality, [dialectics] is a contradiction against reality" (Horkheimer and Adorno, ND 144-45). Contradictions motivate Critical Theory, and for the sake of contradicting what is otherwise taken for granted, exposing cultural delusions, making apparent how, for example "the misplaced love of the common people for the wrong which is done them is a greater force than the cunning of the authorities" (p. 134).

The danger in such a constant assault on common sense is that it will carry with it some faint recall of the inconsolable crankiness of critique in childhood, if with the highest philosophical guise. Is it to be a critique of everything, and nothing but critique, all of the time? The Frankfurt Circle was driven by a particular dilemma, that at its broadest, entailed the successive loss of humanity in the face of a growing bureaucratic administration and ordering of our lives, which was felt, for example, as "advance in technical facilities for enlightenment is accompanied by a process of dehumanization" that, in Horkheimer's judgment, threatens to "nullify the very goal it is supposed to realize—the idea of man" (2004, p. v). But as well, those involved in Critical Theory's project saw themselves contributing to, in Marcuse's words, a "materialist protest and materialist critique [that] originated in the struggle of oppressed groups for better living conditions and remain permanently associated with the actual process of the

struggle” (1958, p. 141). For Horkheimer, it was to be philosophy against economy, with the intent of making it clear the transformations underway that were turning “fair exchange into a deepening of social injustice, a free economy into monopolistic control, productive work into rigid relationships which hinder production, the maintenance of society’s life into the pauperization of the peoples” (1972, p. 247)

The turn to Critical Theory, then, could be cast as sufficient in itself, and bound to be something less as it is treated as a starting point or part of a larger program of hope. Adorno, especially, held to the value of keeping theory from practice: “Praxis is a source of power for theory, but cannot be prescribed by it” (1998b, p. 278). Criticism is cast as crucial for culture: “Culture is only true when implicitly critical... criticism is an indispensable element of culture” (Adorno, 1967, p. 22). It is as if the act of criticism is the only way to clear a place to stand within what is otherwise cast as “unjust state of life,” the only way to rise above “the impotence and pliability of the masses” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972, p. xv). While engaging the contradictions within that state of life is a form of action, or at least reaction, it does not seem, to me at least, to be an instance of Marx’s famous call to philosophers: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it” (Marx, 1995).¹⁷ Such a charged expression might well serve critical literacy advocates, in their aspirations to use literacy to remake the world. Critical Theory, on the other hand, has as its goal “utterly critical criticism,” in another of Marx’s felicitous phrases (2000). If philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point for Critical Theory is to interrupt those interpretations, and to interrupt them with daring and aggressive interpretations capable of hurtling past the “horizon of untruth that bars the door to real emancipation,” in Marcuse’s phrase (1968, p. 151). Such interruptions may indeed change the world, but that prospect—and what would come of it—is not the point for Critical Theory.

The faintness of hope for substantial, life-altering change running through Critical Theory can be discouraging. Simone Chambers calls it “the politics of engaged withdrawal” (2004, p. 220), and it is fortunate, in that sense, that what critical literacy advocates such as Steinberg (2005b) achieve makes critique anything but politically withdrawing (see also Brady, 1994; Fecho 1998). Yet those who have worked this early vein of Critical Theory have demonstrated that the withdrawal affords an ability to bring to the surface just how deeply mired modern life is

¹⁷ See Marcuso (2006), for example, who cites this famous statement in relation to Critical Theory.

in a dehumanizing administrative apparatus of technical rationality in which we are offered “enlightenment as mass deception” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972, pp. 120-167). To call for developing one’s critical literacy skills and filling one’s semiotic toolkits within such a context can seem a little distracting in its own right. Which is to say that this is not simply a story of mixing and blending elements from Critical Theory and literacy pedagogies, but of preserving something of where and how that critical element plays itself out. Not that this critical spirit won’t be compromised and contradicted in moving these ideas into the schools, which are part of the culture industry. This critical spirit was certainly and necessarily compromised within the Frankfurt School, yet without being completely submerged or lost.

To see how this commitment to the critical negative, this great refusal, can turn, within the scope of one man’s work, I would conclude with Theodor Adorno’s response to questions of political and pedagogical action during the 1960s. At the time, Marcuse was enjoying his standing as something of a rock-star philosopher, never more so than when he appeared onstage with poet Allen Ginsberg and Black Power activist Stokely Carmichael at a Dialectics of Liberation conference in London in 1967 which was recorded on a rather overwhelming 23 LP records (Marcuse 1967). If Marcuse got with the program, Adorno kept to the critical line and the politics of engaged withdrawal to a rather dismal end. Adorno did deliver lectures on philosophical and general topics (“Free Time”) on the radio during the 1960s, showing an impressive concern with making his prose more public: “I want to be understood by my listeners” (cited by Pickford, 1998, p. viii).

It is worth noting that in the course of these radio talks, Adorno addressed more than once his work with school teachers. He was involved in the examinations in philosophy that needed to be passed in order to qualify as teachers (only in Germany, you say?).¹⁸ He expressed a concern over the quality of teaching in elementary education, proposing that, if anything, soulless teaching of the young “was partially responsible for the catastrophe of National Socialism” (1998c, p. 28). With this concern, the education of teachers stood as a practical activity for Adorno, a merging of theory and practice that he otherwise resisted. He eschewed, as might be expected, scientific approaches to teaching: “They imagine that their salvation is secured if they follow scientific rules, heed the ritual of science, surround themselves with

¹⁸ Adorno quotes from the exam regulations on how they are intended to “determine whether the applicant has understood... the vital philosophical, pedagogical, and political questions of the present” (1998b, p. 21).

science” (1998c, p. 32). One can imagine that the current U.S. government’s What Works Clearinghouse run by the Institute of Education Sciences, as the perfect embodiment of instrumental rationality in the overly administered lives of teachers, would not go over well with the Frankfurt Circle (even as it has proven flawed by its own standards; Schoenfeld, 2006). The methodological fetish that Critical Theory worked hard to expose represents another area where critical pedagogy has demonstrated how teachers can, in a very practical sense, exercise methodical resistance to authorized methods (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998).

There was, as well, another side to Adorno the educator of educators. In a talk, starkly entitled talk “Education After Auschwitz,” opened with the simple and profound declaration that “the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again” (1998d, p. 191). In facing the ultimate educational question, Adorno did not hesitate to recommend a systematic series of steps intended to prevent any reoccurrence: “One must come to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds, must reveal the mechanisms to them, and strive by awakening a general awareness of those mechanisms, to prevent people from becoming so again” (1998d, p. 193). It signals his own educational compromise with Critical Theory, given the positivistic, programmatic, and instrumental nature of these recommendations. Sometimes confronting the toughest questions leads us into taking reassuringly confident stands, and, in this case, you can hear the voice of a concerned educator speaking to a radio audience. As I mentioned earlier with Steinberg, there is place for maintaining a healthy distinction between the practices of theory in one’s published work and the theory informing practices with educators, and in this instance, Adorno’s fails to sustain the necessary connections between the two. Later in the same talk and more promisingly—in terms of where Critical Theory might meet education on its own terms—he holds with the educational principle of encouraging “autonomy” among the students and “the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating” (p. 195).¹⁹ In this instance, at least, Adorno’s position is closely aligned with the critical literacy advocates who draw on Critical Theory, with the interest in fostering critical reflection and refusal balanced by their systemic affirmation of the work that schools need to do.

However, for Adorno the teacher and inactivist theorist, it was to end badly in the classroom. In April of 1969, he was subject to a bizarre act of political theatre that took place as

¹⁹ Adorno describes “autonomy,” in this context, as “the Kantian expression,” in reference to how Kant held that enlightenment was about people moving out from under the tutelage of others (1970).

he began to lecture on “dialectical thinking” at the University of Frankfurt (Lee, 2006). Students at the university had been protesting the lack of educational reform, as they were in many spots around the world, as well as the particular failure of German society to deal more openly with its Nazi past. In all this, the Frankfurt School was proving a disappointing source of seemingly inert Critical Theory for the more militant of the students. Just a few minutes into Adorno’s lecture that day, a student ran up to the blackboard and wrote “Whomever allows the beloved Adorno to do what he pleases will remain under the spell of capitalism forever” (Lee, 2006, p. 114). This was followed by a commotion in the classroom, as Adorno sought to bring order to the situation, during which three women belonging to the German Socialist Students came to the front of the room and surrounded Adorno. They began showering him with tulip and rose petals while baring their breasts, after which they distributed a brochure entitled, “Adorno as an institution is dead” (ibid.).²⁰ This bizarrely staged mock funeral was to presage his actual death a few months later from a heart attack that he suffered while on holiday in Switzerland.

In February 1969, two months prior to the disruption of his lecture on dialectical thinking, Adorno gave a very brief radio talk entitled “Resignation.” He obviously felt compelled to deal with the general accusation that his refusal to become involved in or support the activities of the New Left during the 1960s was an act of resignation.²¹ He spoke from the perspective of, as he put in his opening line, “we older representatives of that for which the name Frankfurt School has established itself” (1991, p. 198). He did not pull any punches in this statement: “We are not prepared to draw the practical consequences from this theory” (ibid.). This stance had been interpreted, he noted, as offering “tacit approval” of current conditions and an unwillingness “not to get his hands dirty” (p. 199). He offered a relatively arrogant denial that this is the case. He suggested that “fear” is at the root of the “repressive intolerance toward a thought not immediately accompanied by instructions for action,” a fear that “this thought is right” (ibid.). It is right (or perhaps it is *more likely to be* right, one might want to say) because “thinking, employed only as the instrument of action, is blunted in the same manner as all instrumental reason” (p. 202). The idea is worth pausing over.

Could our thinking about education and literacy be blunted by this interest in seeing our

²⁰ Lisa Yun Lee interprets the incident as a direct challenge to his masculinity, as well as the impotence of theory (2006, p. 115).

²¹ Adorno had taken a few token political steps earlier that year by sending two essays that defended the rights of homosexuals to the new Minister of Justice in light of proposed reforms on the penal code (Pickford, 1998, p. ix).

work become “the instrument of action?” It speaks to the value of pursuing the practice of theory as a critical activity without always asking whether it is practical enough, whether it can be implemented in classrooms, whether it is what education students need to become good teachers, whether it is sensitive enough to the current educational climate of test-accountability. It speaks, as well, to an interest in working out the critique as itself an integral act that may – once it is fully realized, debated and discussed by others – later have practical implications whether in terms of empirical research (to pick up an earlier point) or teacher education programs. There may be something desperate, as Adorno charges, in reformist efforts entirely focused on taking small steps against “a thoroughly mediated and obdurate society” (p. 201). Today, with “designated protest areas” (cages really) set up for world summits, there may be something to his charge that activism represents the channeling of spontaneity in an “administered world” (ibid.).²² But finally, for Adorno, the rejection of activist programs of reform came down to the simple pleasures of intellectual work: “Thought achieves happiness in the expression of unhappiness”(p. 202). In not letting anyone take that away from him, he concludes, he “has not resigned” (p. 202).

Despite Adorno’s final pout on the question of resignation and the price he was to pay two months later in the classroom, his insistence on the value of critique being taken on its own terms is well taken. It can indeed seem, as social activism is being carefully staged and orchestrated, while critical literacy advocates are developing more elaborate programs, that it is important to continue to create an educational space within critical literacy for the culture of critique, a space to work out critiques that can seize hold of the most basic contradictions, broken promises, seeming conundrums, and necessary compromises. It is important, in that sense, to treat that critique as the supremely educational event, in fostering autonomy and reflection. The intellectual space of refusal and, yes, resignation from, say, reformist efforts needs to be judged for the larger sense and insight that it can contribute to our understanding as one of the valuable forms that critical work in literacy can take.

I say this as one whose work has been moving away over the last decade from writing critiques of literacy programs, linguistic ideologies, imperial legacies, and other acts of seeming critical literacy, to developing software programs, with accompanying semi-promotional rhetoric

²² In a similar channeling vein, Michael Crowley has noted how “conference calls and e-mail messages to Congress have mostly replaced antiwar demonstrations and street theater” (2007, p. 55).

and advocacy research, that are designed to contribute to the economic and political reform of scholarly publishing.²³ This move came out of a time for me when the idea of undertaking another critique, of pursuing another related line of contradiction with the educational legacy of imperialism, seemed too much like doing too little. I wondered if it would not mean more to create an alternative path for at least one aspect of the institutional structures and administered life by which I lived, namely how this academic community unnecessarily and thoughtlessly restricted access to the knowledge it so proudly produced (Willinsky 2006). It is a project that draws, in part, on later generations of Critical Theory, on Habermas's hopes (1991) for improving the quality of rational communication by extending the public sphere and the possibility of a more deliberative democracy (for which he has been accused of leaving Critical Theory behind; Chambers, 2004, pp. 232-235) and on Andrew Feenberg's notions (1995) of the possibilities of democratizing technology. What may be lost in my less-than-critical turn to developing and promoting new publishing models has been part of what this chapter has tried to bring forward, as part of Critical Theory's legacy for critical literacy. That is, there remains the need for such work, and critical literacy more generally, to be led by the distinct work of engaged critique.

In this time of anniversaries, it seems only appropriate to consider again, the compromises and contradictions, as well as the very charge of a Critical Theory, that continue to provide a reference point for the place of the critical. Fortunately, a number of those associated with critical literacy continue to work both the critical and instrumental strands with a distinctiveness that make educational settings interesting and promising and do so without having these two approaches cancel, or unduly blunt, each other. Adorno held that "the only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection" (1998c, p. 193). If we can look for ourselves in that reflection, in who we were and what we first took hold of, and what we hold to now—especially in thinking about the relation that critical literacy holds between theory and practice—we will indeed have something to celebrate, if not in the getting of wisdom finally, then in realizing the weight of critical choices.

²³ See the Public Knowledge Project (<http://pkp.sfu.ca>), including my related, and freely available, publications (<http://pkp.sfu.ca/biblio>).

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