The first decade of the 21st century brings with it a resurgence of interest in critical theorizing and innovative use of critical approaches in English language arts (ELA) research. Every researcher’s epistemological point of view informs her theoretical framework, methods, and questions as well as guides data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The goal of critical theory, according to Fay (1987) is to “explain a social order in such a way that it becomes itself the catalyst which leads to the transformation of this social order” (p. 27). Critical theorizing is not a mystical understanding reached by only a select few. In fact, Gramsci (1971) has argued that everyone is a critical theorist: “participants in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world, or to modify it, that is to bring into being modes of thought” (p. 9). Critical theories and methods have evolved over time to address “new theoretical insights and new problems and social circumstances” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 306). This on-going process of reconceptualization, or criticality, meets the ever-changing challenges and complexities of our world and lives in the world. A brief review of the epistemological “roots and routes” (Hall, 1984) of critical theorizing and current manifestations that inform ELA critical approaches follows. The chapter concludes with a discussion of applications of critical theorizing in qualitative ELA studies.

Epistemological and Theoretical Foundations

Critical theorizing is part of a vast history of ideas in the world and as such there is no definitive history of critical theory. There are several key moments in critical theorizing—used as a convenient means of understanding the ever-evolving nature of critical theory—but these do not form a comprehensive history. Most commonly, historical overviews of critical theory begin with Western European ideas. In this chapter, they are followed by the often-overlooked contributions of African American scholars and social activists. Next, the contributions of Paulo Freire are reviewed because of their importance to ELA researchers that employ critical literacy and critical literacy pedagogy. The most recent moment, centering of racial/ethnic epistemologies, theories, and methods, follows.

Western-Eurocentric From a Western-Eurocentric point of view, critical theorizing begins with the thinking and scholarship of Kant, Hegel, and Marx that informs the ideas, thoughts, personalities, and writings associated with members of Das Institut für Sozialforschung (Institute for Social Research), also known as the Frankfurt School. The initial focus of the Institute was “first and foremost to serve in the study and extension of scientific Marxism” (Wiggershaus, 1994, p. 35). Scholars from the Frankfurt School did not create or promote a unified notion of critical theory, but rather “they came to view their disciplines as manifestations of the discourse and power relations of the social and historic contexts that produced them” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 280). Individual scholars were advocates of select Marxist principles, others preferred to focus on the writings of Kant or Hegel, and still others sought to create new theories. Critical theorizing was interdisciplinary albeit it focused on the industrial corporate state (capitalism/economics) and politics. During this moment, social class was the primary, but not sole, unit of analysis.

Critical Theory (capitalized to reflect this particular moment) examined power and its relationship to economic and social class issues. The writings of Antonio Gramsci (1971), an Italian Marxist, shifted the focus to hegemony and ideology; later extending to culture, language, and society (Forgas, 2000). In addition, the writings of Frantz Fanon (1965, 1967) challenged traditional CT scholars to openly address issues of colonialism, ideology, imperialism, and racism.

Bronner (2002) reveals that Frankfurt School’s emphasis among the first, second, third, and fourth generations (Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Jurgen Hab-
ermas, and Stuart Hall, among others) highlights shifts in focus and units of analysis from primarily social class to culture, language, mass communication, media, etc. Scholarship will continue to evolve as subsequent generations advance CT. In general, however, early variations of CT did not address issues of race/ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation in their critical projects.

**Early 20th-Century African American** In the Americas, social theorists also examined notions of hegemony, ideology, and power; particularly those who experienced colonialism, inequality, and oppression. African American scholars and social activists, Ana Julia Cooper, W. E. B. DuBois, and Carter G. Woodson, extended CT notions in the application and examination of race, gender, inequality, oppression, and power. Cooper (1892), for instance, argued that Black women faced both gender and race discrimination and held very little power. DuBois (1903/1995) compellingly argued that people of African descent in the United States lived with double-consciousnesses, “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DuBois, 1995, p. 3). Woodson (1933) clarified that in U.S. society, African Americans were coerced into replicating White thinking. Collectively, the scholarship of these social activists is antecedent to contemporary notions of critical theories (lower case to reflect expanded notions of criticality directly and expressly addressing race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and their intersectionality).

**Paulo Freire: Critical Theorizing and Critical Pedagogy** Latin American scholar and social activist, Paulo R. N. Freire (1921–1997) also fought against inequality, oppression, and power. Epistemologically, Freire’s thinking was informed by several social theories, most notably the writings of Marx. He adopted Marx’s dialectical materialistic epistemology that calls for “1) understanding the interrelated processes happening in the world; and 2) provide space for human intervention in the processes to change that world for better” (Au, 2009, p. 224). Freire’s ideas are best captured in his notion and application of **conscientização**; a concept that expanded over time to reflect changes in history, culture, politics, and social circumstances. Initially, he declared:

> Every relationship of domination, of exploitation, of oppression, is by nature violent, whether or not the violence is expressed by drastic means. In such a relationship, dominator and dominated alike are reduced to things—the former dehumanized by an excess of power, the latter by the lack of it. (Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom, 1996, pp. 339–340)

Freire extended conscientizaçã to represent, “awareness of the historical, sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and subjective reality that shapes our lives, and our ability to transform that reality” (Leistyne et al., 1996, p. 340). He believed that social transformation was possible through education (Freire, 1970). He created a venue for teachers to envisage their role as agents of social change by adopting and adapting a humanizing, critical pedagogy. Ideas that evolved from his work include critical literacy, critical literacy and pedagogy honor and respect humankind as well as the multiple cultures, knowledges, languages, and literacies of learners. The lifework of Freire also encouraged educators, teachers in particular, to develop their critical consciousnesses and to help develop critical consciousness in learners. There are numerous definitions, descriptions, and features of critical literacies however, epistemologically all reference CT and the influence of Freire’s theorizing. Aronowitz and Giroux (1985), for instance, posit that critical literacy:

> would make clear the connection of between knowledge and power … demonstrate modes of critique that illuminate how, in some cases, knowledge serves very specific economic, political and social interests … function as a theoretical tool to help students and others develop a critical relationship to their own knowledge. (p. 132)

Anderson and Irvine (1993) suggests critical literacy encompasses “learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (p. 82). Shor (1999) describes features of critical literacy as an approach, discourse, pedagogy, social practice, means of self-discovery, and an avenue to promote justice and challenge inequality. He defines **critical literacy** as “language use that questions the social construction of the self… examine our ongoing development, to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act in it” (p. 2). Janks (2002) and Luke (2004) have extended definitions to address the complexities of the increase use and dependence on media and technology to communicate, local and global contexts, and the uses of New Literacies in classrooms.

McLaren (2000) characterizes critical pedagogy as “a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state” (p. 35). Apple, Au, and Gandin (2009) articulate that most projects “broadly seek to expose how relations of power and inequality (social, cultural, economic), in their myriad forms combinations, and complexities are manifest and are challenged in the formal and informal education of children and adults” (p. 3). As critical theory continues to progress, current manifestations also will change to reflect cultural, economic, historical, political, and social circumstances.

**Critical Race/Ethnic Epistemologies and Theories**

The 20th anniversary of Critical Race Theory (CRT) occurred in 2009. It marked a milestone in an intellectual movement that embraced and challenged the historical moment when
it began. CRT called for the explicit acknowledgement of the lived experiences of people of color in the United States, and, now globally. It extended early Leftist attempts of White scholars, Critical Legal Studies (CLS) advocates, to move toward radical scholarship and explicated the “meaning of race, racism, and law to people of color and the world” (Onwuachi-Willing, 2009, p. 1501). Delgado (2009) shares the early beginnings of CRT by retelling three separate but interwoven stories about its origins from Harvard, Berkeley, and Los Angeles. He recalls how CLS attendees gave time, space, and audience to scholars of color, but “made few, if any, organizational changes” (p. 1514). Delgado opines that all three stories serve to inform a history of the early days of CRT as the historical moment and contexts (cultural, political, social) were pregnant with possibility for the theoretical orientation among legal scholars of color. CRT pioneers sought to “reexamine the terms by which race and racism have been negotiated in American consciousness, and to recover and revitalize the radical tradition of race-consciousness among African-Americans and other peoples of color” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. xiv). Proponents acknowledge that the concept of race is socially constructed and not a biological or scientific fact while simultaneously understanding that this construct operates as “fact” within the United States and reflects a history of oppression for people of color.

CRT is informed by Black feminist theory, critical theory, critical legal studies, feminism, liberalism, Marxism/ neo-Marxism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, and neopramatism. Race-conscious theories that emerged include: AsianAmerican Critical Theory (Chang, 1993; Liu, 2009); LaCrit (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001); Critical Indigenous/ Studies (Bishop, 2005); Critical White Studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Giroux, 1997; Rodríguez, 2001); Red Pedagogy (Grande, 2004); Tribal Critical Studies (Brayboy, 2005); and critical raced feminisms (Collins, 1990/2000), Chicana feminism (Delgado-Bernal, 1998) and Mestiaz consciousness (Delgado-Bernal, 2001, 2002; González, 2001), among others. These contemporary critical evolutions fill-in the gaps found in CT—gendered, race-centered, and sexual orientation—and interrogate intersecting oppressions of class, language, immigrant status/citizenship, and religion within multiple domains of power. Moreover, CRT demonstrates a need to adopt a more inclusive epistemological and theoretical stance; a multi-perspectival approach that accepts the intersectionality and fluidity of forces in contemporary research. A number of scholars (Ladson-Billings, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Tate, 1997) have adapted CRT for education. Scholars have applied its themes to education research and ELA researchers have apply CRT to studies of language and literacy.

In sum, the epistemological and theoretical moments of critical theorizing expose the complexity of criticality. Although there is no singular definition, history, theory, or method that is common to all criticality, there are shared characteristics that inform critical projects, summarized by Kincheloe & McLaren (1994):

- all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between concept and object and between signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption; that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness); that certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary and that focusing on only one at the expense of others (e.g., class oppression versus racism) often elides the interconnections among them; and, finally, that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression. (pp. 119–120)

Weis, Fine, and Dimitriadis (2009), more recently, have called for expanding critical research methods to become more imaginative and courageous, to account for “deep, local, and historic conditions within which cultures and movements grow and change and at the same time such evidence of the ways in which global lives carry across sites, bodies, capital privilege, culture, critique, and despair” (p. 439).

The singular unit of analysis of the Frankfurt School has given way to more totalizing critiques that seek to account for intersecting, layered, and interrelated forces through transformative action. Criticality has retained CT’s interdisciplinary, but now draws on multiple critical theories and uses units of analysis that include gender, language, race, religion, and sexual orientation among others.

Critical Approaches in ELA Research

Approaches or methods of criticality are not reducible to a set of steps, guidelines, and criteria (Bronner, 2002; Quantz, 1992). Applications of critical approaches acknowledge the epistemological and theoretical positions that inform the question(s) posed, observations, data collection, development of categories, coding of units, links between categories, selecting compelling examples, framework for analysis and interpretation, and presentation of data. Critical theories inform qualitative research methodologies in case study, discourse analysis, ethnography, and narrative (autobiography, biography, counter/storytelling) inquiry. ELA researchers also use criticality to enhance understandings the effects of global and local contexts (historical, political, social) in language and literacy theorizing, research, and praxis.

Carspecken and Apple (1992) and Lamphere (1994) describe a body of research that exhibits general critical qualitative methods. Bloome and Carter (2005) define critical discourse analysis as “a set of approaches to discourse analysis focusing on power relations. The models of power, understandings of language, culture, and social processes, and foci of analysis, varies across approaches”
(p. 1). Critical ethnography draws on five reoccurring themes: knowledge, values, society, culture, and history (Quantz, 1992). Foley and Valenzuela (2005) believe that critical ethnography addresses issues of power, language, and truth. Madison (2005), however, characterizes critical ethnography as “critical theory in action” (p. 15). Critical policy analysis, according to Shaw (2004) consists of the following assumptions: single truth theory, researcher objectivity, and homogenization of participant experience. Edmonson (2002), whose body of work interrogates policies related to reading research, claims that “educational policy and educational practices are never objective, technical matters. Instead they are always evaluative and political” (p. 118). There is a long and troubling relationship between federal policies and literacy, underscored by power relations and class and racial discrimination and inequality. Critical literacy research has exposed and helped to demystify the ideological hegemony that sustains the reproduction of mainstream literacy research, practices, and recommendations.

CRT scholars draw from multiple racial/ethnic epistemologies to situate their work and ask questions that challenge preconceived notions about the beliefs, values, knowledge, and ways of making meaning held by people of color. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argue CRT methodology is theoretically grounded research that: foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process; challenges the traditional research paradigm, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of people of color; offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination; focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color; and uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, humanities and the law to better understand the experiences of students of color (p. 24).

CRT methods emphasize cultural and experiential knowledge through narratives and voice to examine race, racism, and power in society. Scholars produce their own narratives as counter-stories to the way culture, lives, and experiences of people of color that contradict or oppose the assumptions and beliefs held by many Whites. Inherent in the narrative forms are voice, or the ability of a group to articulate their experience in ways unique to them (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). The process begins by collecting, examining, and analyzing a host of concepts, ideas, and experiences while using both theoretical sensitivity and cultural intuition. Next, counternarratives are constructed by gathering data, reviewing extant literature, drawing on their professional experiences, and reflecting on their personal experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 476). Finally, several scholars have extended the use of CRT to include literary analysis (Brooks, 2009), personal stories (Aguirre, 2005), portraiture (Chapman, 2005), and a self-study of Whiteness (Marx & Pennington, 2003).

Critical theorizing rests on the hope of effecting positive change to create an equitable socially just society. As critical approaches continue to evolve, ELA researchers’ applica-

tions also will evolve as they address equity and injustices, challenge traditions in the field, resist the reproduction of ideas and values of privileged and dominant groups, improve pedagogy and curricula, and help to transform ELA processes to become more socially just.

References


