**Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation.** Ernest Morrell (2008)


*Reviewed by Elaine Richardson*

*Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation* focuses on work carried out with urban high school students that demonstrates Ernest Morrell's development and application of a theory of critical literacy practice and social change. He weaves together three conceptual and methodological strands: grounded theory, poststructural ethnography, and critical teacher research. Morrell developed a metatheory of critical literacy pedagogy from his studies of the Western philosophical and non-Western “othered” traditions. His metatheory is also informed by his literacy teaching and teacher research over a twelve year period as he worked with teenagers in classrooms, neighborhoods, and institutions in Southern and Northern California.

Morrell asserts that he is:

> drawing upon 2500 years of “critical literacy theory” that inform, at some level, how we think about the terms “critical,” “literacy,” and “theory” and their possibilities for revolutionizing urban educational practice and specifically...literacy instruction. (p. 9)

Morrell contends that students and their teachers must become educated about the socially constructed and ideological nature of language, with an emphasis on the political, cultural, and ideological workings of the literacies...
of power. He argues that critical literacy requires the conscious citizen, especially urban youth, to confront, resist, and transform hegemonic discourses. In the introduction, Morrell gives a good summary of the major arguments and predicaments of literacy matters: the literacy myth – that consumption and production of academic text leads to success and that socio-economic development is directly related to literacy development. Morrell’s summary of pertinent literacy matters includes the problems of traditional literacy pedagogy and traditional conceptions of literacy. Scholars of multicultural education and literacy have argued that traditional literacy pedagogy is boring and alienating for culturally marginalized groups. Further, the traditional hegemonic conception of literacy is that it is autonomous, neutral, disinterested, value-free, and monolithic. This view fails to account for the multiple, situated, and ideological nature of language and literacy, and that they are part and parcel of power and social relations. Morrell’s work exemplifies cutting-edge scholarship in new literacy studies, critical pedagogy, and composition studies. He is attempting the challenging task of bridging critical and academic literacy, with popular culture via critical pedagogy. I will begin with a brief critique of the work and then discuss several of Morrell’s contributions to literacy scholarship by reviewing selected chapters of the book.

Morrell’s introduction (Chapter 1) reflects the tensions posed by literacy educators. Both those who align themselves with the explicitly critical ideological models and those who advocate the implicitly ideological yet autonomous model of literacy see themselves as supporting some level of literacy for social transformation. Further, both employ the same language. For example, terms such as “essential literacy skills” are equated with “socially sanctioned language systems.” Additionally, both schools of literacy advocates speak of fostering within “youth skills and attitudes toward language and texts that are essential to remaking the planet” (p. 7). Morrell makes several pronouncements early in the text that may seem antithetical to an African American literacies theoretical perspective, such as when he states that students must develop “and use… conceptual and technical tools that are not acquired naturally through indigenous cultural practices…”; “…[that] even young people who possess ‘critical instincts’ will need to learn…essential literacy skills…” (p. 7). However, as one reads further along in the text, several of Morrell’s precepts cohere with core tenets of an African American literacies perspective.

An African American literacies perspective promotes an approach wherein African American rhetors are heirs to a “broad repertoire of themes and cultural practices as well as narrowly conceived verbal surface features used by many historic and contemporary African Americans, which indicate an alternate worldview” (Richardson, 2003: 33). African American literacies
are cultural practices, literacy technologies, and vehicles for deciphering and acting upon public transcripts (broadly defined) in one’s environment in order to advance or protect the self and make lives better. From this perspective, these cultural practices are the bases of essential literacy skills, as students’ language and cultural identity are inextricably linked to the ways that they make meaning of their experiences in the world. Although Morrell is working more from a Freirean perspective than an African American perspective per se, both view students as resources, bringing their experiences and knowledge to the classroom. As Morrell later states, students are not “adulterated receptacles” waiting to be re-filled with socially valuable information (p. 114). Additionally, he states that labeling urban youth illiterate borders on irresponsible as youth bring many sophisticated yet devalued literacies to the classroom (p. 92). In Morrell’s discussion of critical traditions that have been marginalized from the canon, he acknowledges, especially in his section on Fanon and the Algerians, that dominated people must reclaim their own indigenous linguistic traditions (p. 62).

Another issue that Morrell’s text illuminates is the dilemma of knowledge and power, especially for scholars whose histories have been obscured, subordinated, and/or stolen. Morrell’s theory and pedagogy of critical literacy foregrounds access to information and resisting the dominant means of knowledge production (p. 37). He locates critical literacy and its basis in the foundation of the Western tradition, classical Greek and Roman philosophy, among other colonial empires. Yet he does not acknowledge that the origins of several of the ideas that he presents have been contested by scholars of ancient Egyptian/Kemetic Africa. Foundational concepts of Greek philosophy have been attributed to Ancient Egypt.

In the Nile Valley complex the practice of good speech (Mdw Nfr) prepared one for divine speech (Mdw Ntr), hence they were inextricably linked together…. While there was no specific term such as philosophy used in Ancient Egypt the concept existed in the doctrines and theories that were established prototypes, models and archetypes long before their appearance in later Greek doctrines and theories of Platonic and Aristotelian schools. (Crawford, 2004: 115; see also Crawford, 1996; James, 1954; Hilliard, Williams, and Damali, 1987)

Scholars of Ancient Egypt and Kemetic Africa have contested the widely held belief that some of the foundational concepts of Western philosophy are western in origin. Molefi Asante, one of the marginalized, “othered” scholars whose ideas Morrell argues should be added to the critical canon, agrees that “Greek philosophy is derivative in many respects from Kemetic doctrines of Africa”
This body of knowledge should at least be acknowledged in a historical, analytical, and pedagogical work on critical literacy for urban youth that foregrounds, as Morrell argues, questioning of “the ideas, concepts and ideologies that are presented to us as fact” (p. 38). As a scholar of “othered” traditions, I share this struggle, as it is not expedient for external funding, mainstream publishing, or teaching of traditional subjects.

Morrell’s book is divided into 10 chapters and a useful Appendix (containing description of data methods). Chapters explore: “From Plato to Poststructuralism: The Philosophical Foundations of Critical Literacy”; “‘Othered’ Critical Traditions”; “Teaching Popular Culture in an Urban Secondary English Classroom”; “Conducting Community-Based Research with Urban Youth”; “Cyberactivism”; “Critical Media Literacy”; “Critical Literacy as Care for the Self”; “Critical Literacy as Social Praxis”; and “A Vision of Critical literacy in Urban Education.”

In Chapter 2, Morrell historicizes and theorizes the term critical literacy from the critical tradition in Western philosophy to clarify how the term evolved within traditions with a focus on thinkers and philosophers from Plato to the poststructuralists. He moves from the Greeks (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle), the Middle Ages, the architects of critical philosophy (Kant, Hegel), Marx, Engel, Husserl, and Heiddeger, to critical literacy and its articulation through Gramsci, the Frankfurt School of Social Research, existential phenomenology, feminism, structuralism, and postmodernism to Freire. Morrell argues that “Debates about language, literacy and power are at least as old as the western canon” (p. 30). He rehearses the legacy of Socrates, whom he clearly sees as a founding father of critical literacy, as Socrates revealed to young people the ability of language to mask or create truth (p. 32). Morrell’s definition of literacy encompasses oral language. He sees critical literacy as a synthesis of critical language awareness and critical textual production. Morrell offers a discussion of Aristotelian rhetoric that educators will find useful.

Morrell foregoes discussion of the shortcomings of Kant and The Enlightenment in its relation to African American and Latino/Latina culture (and other urban historically non-preferred groups) to situate the work against the backdrop of the Catholic Church and Christian religion in order to illuminate the revolutionary practices of skepticism. Morrell moves on to discuss the importance of ideology and power, and the importance of consciousness-raising. He reviews the Frankfurt School and its major associates for their contributions to thinking about the working of culture industries and their promotion of oppressive capitalist ideologies (p. 44). There is much useful information in this chapter that prepares the reader for Morrell’s theory, pedagogy, and research.
Chapter 3 argues for the widening of the canon to make space for “‘Othered’ critical traditions” to critique mainstream critical theory. I understand Morrell’s use of “‘Othered’” to follow Said’s underscoring of those who have been left out of the “mainstream tradition of critical thought” (p. 57) because of “race, class, color, or ideology”; however, I find the term disempowering. Nevertheless, Morrell shows that these “scholars have a great deal to offer to the traditions of intellectual thought and activism that have heretofore claimed or been associated with the modifier ‘critical’” (p. 57).

This chapter discusses anti-colonial scholars Franz Fanon and CLR James, postcolonial scholars such as Said, Spivak and Bhabha; African American scholars such as Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, Marcus Garvey, Carter G. Woodson, Huey Newton, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates, Geneva Smitherman, and Molefi Asante (pp. 58–59). Morrell outlines Latino and Caribbean traditions focusing upon scholars and activists such as Pablo Neruda, Aimé Césaire, and Bob Marley. He also looks at poetry, Negritude literature, and roots reggae. He discusses new media philosophers of contemporary youth cultures such as Hip Hoppers, documentary film makers, and rebel music makers.

One of the most powerful statements in Morrell’s text comes after his section rehearsing the successes of anti-colonial discourse. He writes:

...we [should] be able to organize collectives and create learning spaces that would fundamentally alter the way that literacy education is conceived and practiced in urban classrooms across the country. (p. 63)

Morrell offers valuable suggestions about texts to which urban youth should be exposed – Fanon, Spivak, Bhabha, as well as plays of Salman Rushdie and Aimé Césaire, to name a few. He justifies his position on the need for postcolonial studies in arguing that “Teachers and students can employ the tools of postcolonial theory to make sense of these texts as being representative of a larger discourse of marginalization and exclusion” (p. 66).

In Morrell’s discussion of the African American tradition, he identifies Theresa Perry’s and James Anderson’s work on the freedom through literacy tradition in African American culture. He discusses the narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. Among other things, he locates Woodson as predecessor to critical pedagogy – before Freire, Giroux, or McLaren. Influenced by Woodson’s *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933/1990), Morrell argues that “‘classical’ education has removed African-Americans and African peoples from the narratives of science and history” (p. 68).

Morrell continues to argue for the expansion of the 2500-year Western philosophical tradition to locate new media and architects of contemporary
youth culture. He identifies people such as critical film documentarian Michael Moore and critical Hip Hop artist Lauryn Hill. At one point Morrell displays the song lyrics of “The Beast” by Hill’s rap group, Refugee Camp, to show their consistency with Gramscian analysis of dominant hegemony. This is a valuable exercise, especially for those who do not realize the intellectual component of Hiphop discourse (Richardson, 2006). Morrell positions these artist-activists in the tradition of Socrates.

Morrell’s text is peppered with important statements such as this:

> The only way to fully come to terms with the racial achievement gap in literacy education is to understand the historical and contemporary significance of race to the construction of knowledge and the subject in Western society. (p. 82)

Word!

Chapter 4 deals with “Teaching Popular Culture in an Urban Secondary English Classroom.” Morrell begins by calling into question the current trend of English Education in secondary schools which privileges new critical approaches, teaching only traditional literature, and in which the teacher holds the authoritative meaning. He argues for the insistence upon critical textual production, that students should be offered the opportunity to know themselves better, and that they should be offered the opportunity to be more actualized in their literacy education. Graduate students who are newly thinking about critical language awareness may be distracted sometimes by Morrell’s use of terms such as “correct standard language.” It is helpful to keep in mind that Morrell is aware that correct standard language is correct when it is the best choice for the user in a given situation. It is not inherently more correct than other systematically correct forms of language or dialect. Morrell’s conversation on writing instruction is engaging and helpful. He discusses critical language studies and includes important discussions on Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Studies Right to Their Own Language, Ebonics, and Bilingual Education. He argues that educators must confront the politics of language. He explains that educators must understand empowered identities – that people’s knowledge-making is interlocked with their racialized, classed, and gendered identities (among others). Morrell rightly states that the world is changing and so must our ideas about what counts as literature. English education must include a focus on media studies and pedagogy.

Morrell provides data from research in an urban classroom in Northern California where he taught English to mostly poor students of color. His teaching units included youth violence, critical poetry and Hip Hop culture, popular film, violence in society, attitudes toward AIDS, and the ills of urban education
His discussion of critical teacher research and new literacy studies provides a perspective that many would find helpful.

I particularly enjoyed Morrell’s discussion of his simultaneous teaching of *The Odyssey* and *The Godfather* trilogy. Students read *The Odyssey* at home and watched *The Godfather* in 20-minute class sessions with a 15-minute critical note-taking period. Morrell taught the students critical text reading of film and critical text reading of a book simultaneously. Most importantly, he taught students how to critically read the word in relation to the world – how the text (the word) was produced by (unjust) societal conditions outside the text (the world) (p. 98). Morrell offers sample essay exam responses demonstrating critical writing and thought produced by students labeled as marginal.

His unit on the Poet in Society, which met district standards, exposed students to Elizabethan, Romantic, and key American movements. Morrell tied these to critical analysis of song lyrics in academic essay form. Many literacy educators will find Morrell’s approach to the teaching of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* highly useful. His students reenact the Bigger Thomas Trial and in doing so they learn legal language, but more importantly they research the context in which Bigger Thomas lived. This helps them to understand the human condition, their own lives in relation to that of Thomas’ life, practices of the criminal justice system, how sanctioned texts can have oppressive foundations, and how literacy can be empowering. Morrell also uses the context of the trial to teach critical oral rhetoric.

Morrell’s unit on violence offered students the opportunity to study Jonathan Kozal’s *Savage Inequalities*. Morrell ignited within the students their own agency by gearing their assignments toward activism within their own school and community.

[Students] consulted educational databases to gather statistics on funding and academic achievement at their school and at similar schools.... Students learned how to conduct basic research; they conducted interviews with administrators, politicians, and peers.... (p. 111)

Morrell’s approach satisfies a broad spectrum of literacy educators. He writes:

It is not fair to the students to promote collective action at the expense of individual skills development and individual achievement. By the same token, it is socially irresponsible to only focus on achievement without situating the history and culture of underachievement in some sociological context for the students. (p. 111)

I will sum up with a discussion of Morrell’s final chapter, “A Vision of Critical Literacy in Urban Education.” There is so much to learn from this book. Morrell underscores the importance of training students and literacy educators (wher-
ever you find yourself) to become philosophers. These habits of mind involve critical literacies and promote revolutionary change. Morrell argues that these include “how people come to interpret, deconstruct, produce and distribute language and texts that name and ultimately destabilize existing norms and power relations in the cause of promoting change” (p. 208). Morrell shares many important insights. One is that critical literacy training should begin in elementary school, while young people are in their formative years. Students should not only be taught decoding, literal comprehension, and summary – they can be taught that not everything they read is true. Morrell also suggests that young students can be taught to read:

- texts ranging from cartoons, to commercials, to movies and television shows, to video games, to popular music, to Internet websites…. Students can use basic analytic techniques to make sense of how media texts portray populations of color, those who are poor; how they position women, how they characterize developmentally disabled…. (p. 212)

Students also need instruction in traditional writing and writing in different contexts. Morrell suggests various activities that promote critical textual production. Students can design curricula to teach to younger students, act as investigative journalists or social historians within their communities, and other activities. Morrell goes on to discuss critical literacy education across the curriculum – in social studies, history, language arts, foreign language, math, and science. He has many excellent ideas. He asks some thought-provoking and inspiring questions in his “Toward a Universal Critical Literacy” section:

- Can an international social movement…actually begin in schools?
- What would such a movement look like and how might it be different from international literacy movements currently sponsored by organizations such as the United Nations?

Morrell’s text is a must-read for literacy educators of urban youth and global critical citizens.

About the Author

Dr. Elaine Richardson (aka “Dr. E”) is Professor of Literacy Studies at The Ohio State University. Her course offerings include Language Use in African American Communities; Critical Discourse Studies in Education; Changing Perspectives on Language, Literacy and Culture; Language and Society, Applied Linguistics for Teachers of Reading and Language Arts. Her latest book, tentatively titled *PGD to Ph.D.*, is a memoir which chronicles her descent into the street life and rise into the academy.
References


