CULTURAL PLURALISM DEMOCRACY, SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE & EDUCATION

Democracy and Its Discontents

Critical Literacy across Global Contexts

Robert E. White and Karyn Cooper

SensePublishers

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Volume 1

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Tiger got to hunt,
Bird got to fly;
Man got to sit and wonder, "Why, why, why?"
Tiger got to sleep,
Bird got to land;
Man got to tell himself he understand.

From *The Books of Bokonon*

– *Cat's Cradle,* Kurt Vonnegut, 1963, p. 182

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PREFACE

The inspiration for this volume came from a variety of sources. In order to honour the somewhat linear nature of historical interpretation, we first must turn to work that was begun almost a decade ago. We had been working on a series of articles that had, as its main focus, the idea that critical literacy was a necessary component in the teaching of literacy. As this project germinated and eventually came to fruition, we began looking at other projects, and settled upon the innovative notion of video-interviewing some of the great names in qualitative research.

With the assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, this project bore fruit in the form of a volume entitled *Qualitative Research in the Postmodern Era: Contexts of Qualitative Research* (Cooper & White, 2012). The relevance that this tome eventually had for our current project was enormous. Using the same idea of the video-interview and also employing the "Five Contexts," a conceptual framework that had been developed in that book, we applied those to this volume. But, we get ahead of ourselves. These five contexts will be described below in greater detail.

No one would argue that literacy is not an important aspect of today's society. In fact, many school improvement projects identify improved literacy as a key aspect of any educational improvement program. However, we had to ask the question – "What is literacy for?" After some time, we concluded that it was better to be literate than not, but there was still the nagging question – "Is that all there is?" Clearly, there was something more. Literacy may make life easier in terms of finding one's way around, being able to read scripts and many other useful things, but there was also the problem of believing in what one was reading. Who gets to make the decisions about what is presented to the public eye? What is left out of the transmission? Are we to agree with the "word," or is it allowable to disagree? And this is not limited to written scripts, but extends to other scripts, both oral and visual, that have been marginalized over the course of colonialism.

Critical literacy demands a skeptical, if not cynical, approach to all things, including the written word. Critical literacy, in at least some permutations, asks who is the author, what right does the author have to the opinions presented in the script, or text, if you will, and where and what are the biases hidden within the text? Thus, the implicit nature of being critically literate is an essential feature of being able to navigate the new modernities of this postmodern era. It is necessary to question all texts, whether they be linear, two-dimensional or three-dimensional, whether they are readable, observable or subliminal.

What is a text, then, you may wonder? Texts can be any vehicle that is used as a system for the making of meaning. A text can be as simple as a book, a work of art, a computer application or it can move beyond this to incorporate a variety of

different texts within any observable phenomenon. For example, as Helene Cixous contends, the world itself can be viewed as a text. As such, then, we can "perform" critical literacy by becoming invested in understanding the text, not as it is spoken or "written," but as it is interpreted.

Roland Barthes (2004) in his book, *Elements of Semiology,* made the distinction between readerly and writerly texts. The readerly text asks very little of the reader as it requires little work in terms of interpretation. Many novels operate as readerly texts and, once finished, are promptly forgotten. Writerly texts demand more of the reader and require interaction. These texts may not be so easily forgotten, as they demand a certain input in terms of thinking through ideas and possibilities. The notion of critical literacy falls well within the parameters of the writerly text.

It is not the intent of this book to create the impression that there is a single pathway towards critical attention to literacy and its relationship to democratic processes. Rather, it is hoped that this current volume, along with interviews of noted scholars in the fields of critical literacy and democratic processes, will challenge the reader to examine long-held notions. In asking that the reader become engaged with the text at hand, we do not represent this volume as "the truth," so much as a perspective that can be challenged, engaged with and expanded upon.

In order to accomplish the task of bringing a text that is about critical literacy to the fore, we chose to employ a construct that we refer to as the "Five Contexts" (Cooper & White, 2012). Thus, the text is viewed through a conceptual framework that utilizes the five lenses of autobiography, history, politics, postmodernity and philosophy. Through this conceptual framework, it is our goal to gain a perspective on critical literacy and its connections to democracy. It is hoped that the conceptual framework will allow for discussion, a conversation that will engage the reader with the many versions of "truth." It is expected that readers may be troubled by the text; for example, there may be versions of the "truth" that are absent. This, in part, may be due to individual autobiographical contexts the readers bring to text. In addition and by way of example, we, Robert and Karyn, have been socialized into Western views of democratic thought. We recognize, given our own cultural pre-understandings, the limitations that we are living. Therefore, we call for many perspectives and multiple interpretations in this conversation on critical literacy and its relationship to democracy. We hope that further conversations about this relationship will serve to inform issues of causality rather than inscribe notions of a linear reciprocity between critical literacy and democratic values. This view, we hope, will add depth and understanding to a very complex discussion surrounding democracy and critical literacy. That is our hope for this text.

To return to the "Five Contexts," this framework has proven to be invaluable in disentangling complex notions such as the relationship between critical literacy and democratic ideals and practices. The autobiographical context is important, as indicated by our own preconceptions within this text. As such, this context helps to situate a particular speaker or reader within a frame of reference that can assist that reader in making inferences relating to particular individual perspectives. In other

words, this context can enable the recognition of multiple, marginal and dominant perspectives. Through such sharing of perspectives, hopefully one may come away with a broader, more critical viewpoint.

The historical context allows the narrative that is represented by the text to be identified and located within a certain time and place. History is hinged upon powers that hold and write the "truth." For example, many cultures with oral histories have become marginalized or excluded by historical documents represented by a hegemonic discourse, such as "legally binding" written contracts. It is contextual and, given this, one can see that there is not just one conceptual truth. This is why global contexts, and hence, multiple cultural realities, become increasingly important, as our current times become increasingly complex.

As well, the political context helps in determining consequences of the actions that are referenced within the text. Interestingly enough, these contexts run concurrently and are often overlapping or interwoven with other contextual considerations. For example, if one is preparing a birthday celebration, this may be an element of one's autobiography, nothing more. However, this birthday may also represent an historical event as well, such as a one hundredth birthday, a sixty-fifth birthday or even a sixteenth birthday. As such, we attach historical footnotes to events that we wish to remember as special in some way.

Let's take another look at that birthday that is at once autobiographical and historic. It may also have political significance as well. Perhaps that birthday was celebrated on the event of a matter of world significance. Or perhaps that birthday is held in tandem with the birthday of, perhaps, the Canadian patriot, Louis Riel, a founder of the province of Manitoba, and political and spiritual leader of the Métis people of Canada's prairies, or some other great patriot. As you may see, a single event in one individual's life may also be historically significant to that person and beyond, or it may also have greater political overtones. All this to say that the autobiographic, the historical and the political contexts may or may not have overlaps and significances far beyond themselves, as the sum of the whole is often much greater than the sum of its parts.

Add to this the postmodern context. Here is an overlay of what it means to be alive in one of the most exciting epochs in human history. The postmodern era, now frequently referred to as "liquid modernity," has, as its hallmark, questions about the nature of almost everything. Poststructuralists have provided us with the means of deconstructing, the opening up, the re-examining of terms, such as "democracy," in order to recognize the multiple interpretations available in any given text. Thus, it is not so much about questioning the nature of "truth," as to question the contexts within which any discourse is embedded.

This postmodern era is a time when choice abounds, although the choices themselves may not be particularly important. It is a time of change, rapid change, where the one constant has become the accelerating nature of change. Hyperbole exists in terms of the gigantism reminiscent of the prehistoric era when dinosaurs roamed the earth. This gigantism was attributed to the fact that there was a great deal

more oxygen in the atmosphere than exists in this current day and age. However, we have our own forms of gigantism in terms of the proliferation of transnational corporations, in the economic globalization of huge tracts of geographic areas and in the rapid changes occurring within our environment. As such, postmodernity is an important context to assist in making sense of, describing and exploring what critical literacy is and how it has been adapted to our ever-changing circumstances – globally, nationally and locally.

Perhaps the most important context is the final one, the philosophical context, as it allows one to step back and to view the whole ball of autobiographical, historical, political and postmodern contexts with some level of objectivity and to begin to gain some further perspective on the particular phenomenon – in this case, critical literacy and its impact on democracy – under study. Through the pages of this volume, with some of the most influential scholars of our time, across global contexts, we hope to explore the nature of critical literacy and how it has been shaped by individuals, how it is played out in various geographic locations and some of the considerations pertinent to this particular interpretation or permutation of literacy.

In this volume we travel to several parts of the world. Because we are concerned with what critical literacy means and looks like in predominantly English-speaking countries, we chose to explore three Commonwealth countries – Australia, South Africa and Canada. Each of these countries has developed its own views relating to critical literacy. Australia was perhaps the first country to develop a coherent and cohesive approach to critical literacy. As with any country, South Africa continues to struggle with its own democratic issues and with emergent critical considerations. Canada has imported much of its culture from the United States, its neighbour to the south and, as such, critical literacy seems to have assumed a more "continental" perspective.

Video-interviews have provided a means of capturing a number of the "experts in the field." Within the pages of this book, we offer a survey of a number of people who have developed, refined and put into practice – in short, *performed* – critical literacy. These people have offered their time, their insights and their knowledge that adds to our understanding of what critical literacy may be, may become, and how it may operate in these trying times of the postmodern era.

But what of democracy? What does that have to do with critical literacy? There is not one story to tell about democracy, and this volume attempts to bring together a variety of perspectives from renowned scholars to enhance our understanding of what we might mean by this term. If critical literacy can be used to help people understand biases in their various scripts, texts and worlds, then perhaps it may be a useful tool to help people to begin to advocate for themselves. What is the end result of this? Carried to logical extremes, critical literacy can pave the way to a future where powerful "others" can be held accountable for their actions, where decisions that are made "for the people" can be questioned and even, if necessary, reversed. It can help to establish differences between notions of equity and equality, where ideas of meritocracy can be called into question and where people from all walks

of life, race and creed can come together in the spirit of community and humanity. Can critical literacy really help to achieve greater democratic free will? Perhaps this is a tall order. However, to do nothing is to condone current practices that influence power differentials, foster greater consumerism and help to deplete an already suffering planet.

We hope that, as you read through this book, you will come to see the myriad connections between individuals, their influence on others and the impact that this can have for good or for ill. We trust that issues of democracy and the global patterns that we have come to take for granted can be adjusted. This may not be easy and it may not occur in our lifetimes, even if it is to occur at all. However, to not strive for positive social change is to accept the *status quo* as it stands. This is problematic in the face of such issues as world hunger and impoverishment, neoliberal forces of consumerism and political manipulation, and the decimation of a planet that is the only home we know. Clearly, if critical literacy can begin to question such elements and, if it can be seen as a possible way forward, perhaps humanity, in the broadest sense of the word, will stand a fighting chance to leave behind a world that our children would want to inherit. The alternatives are distinctly unattractive.

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Another important individual to this project is Neil Tinker. Neil, thank you. On more than one occasion you managed to work your considerable magic to ensure that videotapes were backed up, accessible and "readable." This project would have stalled and ground to a shuddering halt without your steady hand. We owe you a huge debt of gratitude.

In addition to all the marvelous support that we have received, Frances Tolnai has transcribed all of our interviews. For this, Frances, we are truly grateful. We thank you for your promptness, accuracy and attention to detail. There are numerous others who will remain nameless but who have contributed significantly to this work. To all those people who have helped this project come to fruition, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

Last, but not least, we wish to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its unflagging support of our projects. This grant has allowed us to refine our approaches to video work and has assisted us in our exploration of the intersections between linear texts and video work. Your continuing assistance is greatly appreciated.

CHAPTER 1

DEMOCRACY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

> Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.
>
> —Reinhold Niebuhr (1944)

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

While this volume is about democracy and its relationship to critical literacy, it is first and foremost, a book about critical literacy. However, it is important to begin a discussion that attempts to unpack the notion of democracy, albeit from a secular Westernized tradition. The influential scholars who grace the pages of this volume have informed the conversation by contributing their views, perspectives and opinions. In doing so, it is our intent to question a single, monolithic presentation of an untroubled version of the "truth." It is these scholars who present a forceful critique that helps to deconstruct normative, hegemonic notions of democracy, and helps to underscore Niebuhr's (1944) comment that "Man's [sic] capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's [sic] inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." Truer words were never spoken.

Critical literacy and democracy are intertwined, in this text, so much so that it may nigh be impossible to talk about one without allusions to the other. While critical literacy may be "intertwined" with democracy, they are not one and the same thing. In fact, critical literacy may be a consequence of a deeper conception of democracy, although there are innumerable highly contested debates regarding the nature of democracy and democratic thought. However, one must start somewhere and, so, a brief discussion of democracy follows. For a much more complex and thoughtful discussion on deconstructing the many permutations of democracy, readers could turn to such helpful texts as George Novack's *Democracy and Revolution* (1971) or Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995).

Prior to an all-too-brief discussion of democracy, this volume proceeds to ground critical literacy in three different locations – Australia, South Africa and North America, with specific reference to Canada. The reason for this is that all three of these countries are Commonwealth countries, meaning that, at one time, they were all part of the British Empire, replete with issues of colonialism and the attendant privileges that such power confers on the dominators. However, aside from this commonality, all three countries have enacted critical literacy in a decidedly different vein.

For example, Australia has attempted to operationalize critical literacy within its school system, and some would argue that this represents the dawning of critical literacy in educational fields. South Africa has a different issue with critical literacy and there are an almost infinite amount of factors, arguments, and dissenting voices in that context that would render the issues quite different to those in other parts of the world. Viewing the issue of critical literacy in South Africa as a deficit condition of 'access to education' is very reductionist in a very complex historical and political context such as South Africa. While it may be true that large numbers of the population have been unable to access suitable educational resources, it could be said that aligning critical literacy with access to education tends to repeat the dominant deficit neoliberal discourses on schooling in South Africa that have gained traction post-apartheid, rather than attempting to deconstruct this discourse. While Canada, on the other hand, pays tribute to the idea of critical literacy through the likes of noteworthy literacy pioneers such as Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye, it has not really focused on the topic of critical literacy in the curricula of school districts within its various provinces.

Perhaps because of its relatively small population, much Canadian culture, of course, is imported from its neighbour to the south, the United States of America. Typically, this has a great effect on policies and practices that are established within Canada itself. As a result, this volume will deal with North America as a whole, while striving to separate purely Canadian events from the larger international events that have helped to shape this nation.

In addition to a discussion of how critical literacy is enacted in these countries and how this relates to democratic practices, we have been fortunate in being able to provide video-clips from interviews that we have conducted with a number of notable scholars. These video-clips are provided online and the reader will be prompted to view particular video-clips at different points throughout this book.

In order to facilitate the complexity of a volume that discusses critical literacy and its connection to greater democracy, we employ a framework that we have found to be quite successful in being able to isolate various parts of the discussion for closer examination. This framework we call the "Five Contexts" (Cooper & White, 2012), and each context, while distinctly observable from one to the other, is also capable of overlapping and existing concurrently with the other contexts that we use. These contexts are identified as the autobiographical, the historical, the political, the postmodern and the philosophical context, respectively.

In summation then, we present to you, the reader, a discussion of critical literacy and its connection to democracy, in three different countries, through five separate lenses and include video-clips from interviews with scholars in each of these locales. We begin our journey in Boston, Massachusetts to interview one of the great luminaries, not only of our time, but also of all time, Dr. Noam Chomsky. Then utilizing the five contexts, we travel variously between Australia, South Africa and North America. Eventually, we end our journey in Greece, the cradle of Western democracy, a fitting place to disembark for a number of reasons that will be clear

to the reader who is aware of current (at the time of writing) developments in the European Union. A fitting place indeed, for this is where Western democracy was born, and where this form of democracy has been assailed by the new world order of neoliberal thought.

It must be mentioned that the assertion that Greece is the cradle of democracy is, indeed, Westernized and Eurocentric in origin. To be fair, in his book, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995), Nelson Mandela cites a number of different forms of democracy that were current in Africa, possibly for thousands of years. As well, and in concert, it can easily be argued that many indigenous cultures practised various forms of democracy for many generations, separate from the West. It is not the authors' intent to imply that these traditions derived from the Greek "cradle of civilization."

THE SOCIAL VALUE OF DEMOCRACY

There exists a strong relationship between democracy and any number of social constructs within a democratic society. For example, social justice, equity and equality, and critical literacy are all present in varying degrees in any democracy, nominal or operational. Hopefully, each and every individual who has an opportunity to pick up this book and to open its pages has been in a position where his or her voice has been heard, listened to and acted upon. Of course, this does not mean that the powers receiving this communication from such individuals must hear the voice, listen to the words being spoken and then act upon the message without consideration for the consequences. Due process, debate, testing of alternatives and so on will likely be the result for any voice that calls for change. However, the message here is that it is not always the case that every voice can be heard at any given point in time. In fact, a great deal of effort has been invested in silencing voices, even in democracies. Unfortunately, many people currently living in democracies have had opportunity to reflect upon the fact that their voices have not always been heard or have not been heard at all.

This fact alone brings into focus issues that are related to democracy. These are issues of social justice. The need for every voice to be heard, listened to and acted upon is an essential element of democracy, yet how can this be accomplished in an effective, efficient and logical manner? Habermas (1973) speaks of the ideal speech situation in which the power of the best argument wins the day. However, not every individual is eloquent and, due to greater immigration and the increasing diversity of populations, not everyone speaks the same language within the borders of one's own country. In addition, there remain variances in education, social economic status and a whole host of other reasons why one voice may be heard above others, often silencing or marginalizing other voices along the way. Social justice focuses on the need for all voices to be heard. This implies a greater commitment to the principals of equity, a fundamental goal of critical literacy.

For example, in South Africa, critical literacy has arguably been far more evident than it has in many other international contexts as a result of street politics, and the

mobilisation of solidarity movements in the struggle against apartheid. As well, it could be argued that, given these high levels of critical literacy, access to schooling as it is currently conceived and mandated in the South African context may do little to foster transformation agendas. These complex issues may look very different from colonial, Western notions of critical literacy. It is necessary to understand such conceptions of critical literacy in differing global contexts in order to provide a deep sense of many of the existing contradictions, ambiguities, discrepancies, varied interpretations and issues, range of philosophical and epistemological orientations, all under the name of democracy and critical literacy.

Equity and equality are terms that are often used interchangeably. However, they really represent the extremes of a continuum. For example, equality implies that everyone is treated the same way. We all have to climb the stairs from the first floor in order to get to the second floor. But what about the old, the tired, the frail? Perhaps, in the name of equality, they, too, can be expected to climb the same set of stairs as anyone else. The differential here is represented by issues of time and effort. It will clearly take these people longer to accomplish the same task with greater difficulty than others who may be able to accomplish it without a second thought. But, what about those among us who can no longer walk? Or who never were able to walk? Can we also expect these people to climb this same flight of stairs? It seems that, for some people in such circumstances, climbing this flight of steps is akin to climbing the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. What is to become of them? Are they to be left to their separate fates at the bottom of the stairs? While they may have been treated equally and the expectations placed upon them may be the same as for others who have successfully managed to negotiate the stairs, there remains the matter of equity.

Simply put, equity refers to providing people with what they need in order to obtain the same advantages as others enjoy. For example, if one were to introduce an elevator or a moving stairway, such as an escalator, the people who were left behind are now able to join their peers at the top of the stairs. They have become equal once again.

This is the nature of equity. If people were to be provided with what they need in order to be successful in their endeavours, we would have a more authentic form of equality. In short, the way to true equality is through the practice of ensuring equitable treatment for all. However, even in democratic societies, there is still an imbalance between the more powerful and the less powerful, measured in any terms one may wish. Often, the meritocratic card is played with comments like, “Work for it, like I had to,” or “Those people are just lazy,” or other phrases that serve to justify the fact that some people enjoy privileges that others do not.

This is to say simply that, in any society, there will always be those among us who either have not had the opportunity, the access or the good fortune to have what the majority of people enjoy. Power differentials operate within any society to further marginalize those who are least able to fend for themselves. Even in a democratic